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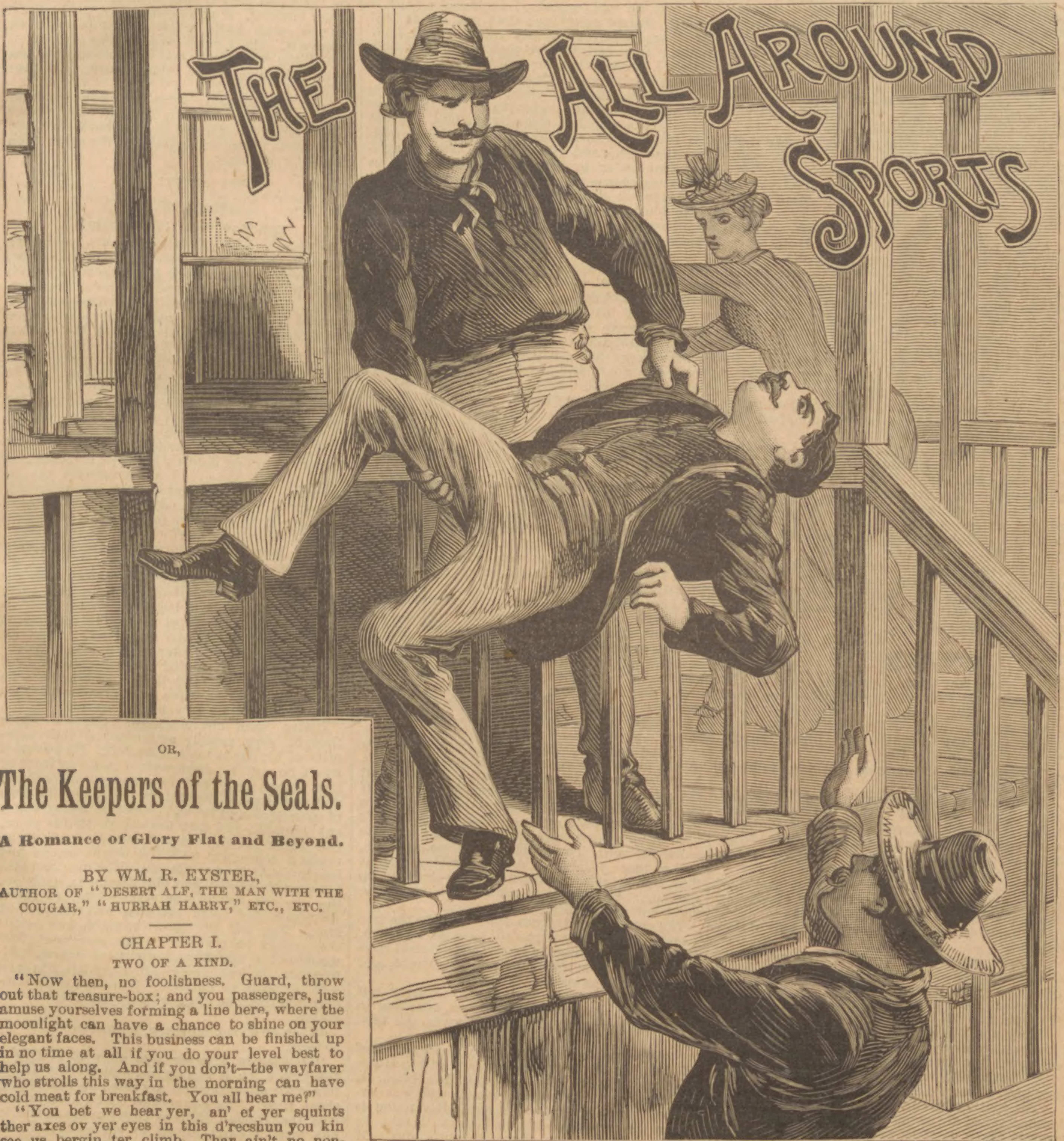
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OR,

The Keepers of the Seals.

A Romance of Glory Flat and Beyond.

BY WM. R. EYSTER,
AUTHOR OF "DESERT ALF, THE MAN WITH THE
COUGAR," "HURRAH HARRY," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.
TWO OF A KIND.

"Now then, no foolishness. Guard, throw out that treasure-box; and you passengers, just amuse yourselves forming a line here, where the moonlight can have a chance to shine on your elegant faces. This business can be finished up in no time at all if you do your level best to help us along. And if you don't—the wayfarer who strolls this way in the morning can have cold meat for breakfast. You all hear me?"

"You bet we hear yer, an' ef yer squints ther axes ov yer eyes in this d'reeshun you kin see us bergin ter climb. Thar ain't no nonsense in this hyer load ov cattle, you kin gamble."

WITH THE EASIEST AIR IN THE WORLD HE FLUNG HIM OVER THE RAILING TO THE
GROUND BELOW, WHERE STOOD THE OTHER SPORT.

It was only the customary thing between Red Bend and Glory Flat.

The "hearse" left the former with a comfortable load of passengers, and a box that was supposed to be well filled with treasure; and was held up accordingly. The second of the speakers showed how much he was in earnest by scrambling out without further delay, and taking up his position at what would be the head of the line as indicated by the man with the revolver.

"One man of sense in this outfit, sure. Is he talking for the rest, or are there any high kickers here, that are in search of immediate glory? If so be that there are, the golden slippers are waiting, and the stairs right in view. Next!"

There was no hesitation in the cargo after the ice was once broken! One after another the passengers filed down and ranged themselves after the self-constituted leader, standing with digits elevated, under the muzzles of the revolvers held by two of the road-agents.

"All out?" queried the captain sharply, seeing that the procession was over, and the line in good shape.

"All out, an' thar goes the box. Rattle through with the job, old man, or I won't be able to make my schedule. It's a long road to the Flat, and a fellow don't care about making the last part of it after dark. It won't take me ner a minnit ter look us all over, an' you kin take yer time ter bu'stin' ther 'Xpress. We ain't 'b'leeged ter check it off fur ye, 'cause it's a pig in a poke ye'r' gettin', ar'yhow."

Jerry Hickson, the driver, by dint of much practice had got his tongue so nicely adjusted that it ran at all times, and on all occasions. It would have been absolutely impossible for him to have kept it quiet even at a funeral; and on such an ordinary, every-day occasion as this it wanted its full swing.

"Dry up, Jerry!" ordered the captain, sharply. "The company pays you to drive, and you stick to that. We will do the rest."

The moon shone so brightly that it was almost as light as day, and the chief of the outlaws advanced to the little row of passengers. There were half a dozen from the inside, and three or four more from the top, the most of them taking the situation quite coolly.

"How's this?" demanded the road captain harshly, when he had counted them over. "Where's the odd passenger? There's one missing. Here! two of you boys look inside; and be careful about doing it. If there is any one there, and he begins to cut up rough, riddle him at once. Can't afford risks, you understand."

The captain was a large, neat looking man, and spoke as though he had a better education than usually falls to the lot of fellows holding his position. Until he made the discovery just noted his voice was pleasant rather than otherwise, and there seemed to be nothing very bloodthirsty about him, despite of the reputation he had won for heartlessness and cruelty.

At this order two of his men stepped forward, their revolvers unpleasantly ready as they threw open the coach door. Then they started back, as though at an unexpected sight.

"There's more than a bargain here!" exclaimed one, as he cautiously raised his pistol, and pointed it within the coach. There are two of them. What are we to do about it?"

"Two, eh? Don't understand that. If you can pick out the right man better shoot the other one, and be done with it. We don't know anything about him. As I was saying, we are not taking any risks."

"But, boss, we can't tell t'other frum w'ich!" put in the other road-agent, as he cautiously peered inside. "Ef I war on me Bible oath I'd swear they war both ther same pu'sson. Ef you could only look fur yerself, meb'be you could see how it are. I ain't had a drink ov ar'ything stronger than coffee fur a week, er I might say I war seein' double. I can't hardly bl'ave I ain't doin' it now."

"What infernal nonsense are you talking? Stand aside!"

The captain made a couple of rapid steps, and then darted into the coach. There was the noise of a slight struggle—the noise made by some one wrestling with an inert mass;—then the road-agent came backing out of the coach door, dragging in either hand a man.

As the three reached the ground the chief gave a sudden flint, that sent the men staggering back, and at the same time, almost—so quick were his motions—he whipped out a pair of derringers.

"Now, curse you, speak! Who are you? Where did the one or the other of you come from? What is the meaning of this? By Heaven! I don't see what reason there is that I should not kill you both!"

Very much in earnest he was in this proposition, or he never could have got such concentrated anger into his tone and manner.

"That's solid, at any rate. I swear, I don't see any, either. Let her went."

The speaker had an easy drawl, and the most unconcerned air in the world. The threat didn't worry him a particle, neither did the left-hand derringer which lay in perfect line for his head. He was offering no resistance, and so far had

not been harmed in the scrimmage of the coach, or in his hasty exit.

The dry retort appeared to put the outlaw in a better humor. He turned to the other man.

"I suppose you are tarred with the same stick. You look enough alike to be twins, and I shouldn't wonder if you were. What sort of an explanation are you going to give about it?"

"Don't know that I am going to give any explanation at all. You seem to be looking for some one in particular, and I am not the man. If you want my pocket-book, why, take it. Outside of that I can't see that you can have any interest in me, and you are just wasting valuable time in this nonsense."

"You're another, are you? About as cool as they make 'em, and not disposed to kick when there is nothing to be gained by it. Perhaps it won't be such a waste of time to talk it over a little, after all, and find out what sort of a lay you're on. The man I was looking for don't seem to be on board, but maybe you will do as well. And there is a little account to settle with Jerry Hickson. Drivers generally are supposed to be safe under a flag of truce—but then they always tell the truth. Whatever possessed Jerry to start out to lie, at this late hour of his life, is more than I can understand. The only way to cure him before the habit gets formed is to throw him in the chute, and let him went. Jerry!"

Jerry had been silent. For once something had happened that had rendered him speechless. At this direct address he burst out:

"Pon me soul, captain, I don't understand it at all! Here's every soul that got on at Red Bend, and where those two come from I don't know. You sure they're there? Ef they ain't ghosts I dunno what ter call 'em. Say, gents: did any one ov you see 'em afore?"

Jerry had taken his place in line, along with the rest, leaving his horses to the care of the road-agents who had them by the bits. It was the way that Captain Flash did business with the stage men, and Hickson had not required a special order in his case. Now, he gave an appealing glance at the other passengers, and waited for confirmation of his words.

Evidently to his surprise it did not come. The passengers looked from one to another, but remained silent.

The captain was quick to notice this, and to supply the probable cause. It must be that Jerry was not telling the truth. Indeed, it could not be otherwise, if he was to believe the evidence of his own senses. He too turned to the passengers with an appeal, though it was worded quite differently from that of Jerry.

"Speak up there, some one; and if I find that he or she don't tell the truth in every line I'll put him in shape to sup with his great-great-grandfather this very night. What yarn is this that Jerry has been giving us? Where did these two get on? and does any one know anything about them? You, there, speak up. And keep right down to the line of truth if you don't want your wife to be a widow."

The captain singled out a respectable-looking, middle-aged man, who had been one of the inside passengers, and brought one of his derringers to bear on him. The man thus addressed cleared his throat nervously, opened his mouth and closed it again, as though he found it rather hard work to furnish the desired information. Finally he blurted out:

"I don't want to get that driver into trouble, but blame me if the men weren't in when I got on board, and I happened to be the first man of the rest to take a place. I don't know who they are, and, as far as I know, they haven't said a word to any one since we left Red Bend. That is all I know about it; and I wouldn't have said that if it was not for that same wife and family you hinted of. I want to get back to see them."

"Good enough! That saves your bacon for this time, unless something fresh turns up. So, Jerry, you were lying, after all. I'll see what the gents have to say for themselves now. If they are still unwilling to open out I will have to have their pedigree from you. If you can't give it when you are called on, so much the worse for you. That's all. Now then, open up, and no more joking. It sounded well enough at first, but it gets monotonous when it's kept up too long. Who are you, gents? The one on the right will answer first."

The chief turned from the driver to the two men, and narrowly regarded them as he spoke. If they were in disguise he certainly should have discovered it, for the moonlight was bright, and his eyesight was keen.

"There is no use to make a mystery out of it," answered the one called on, speaking in quite a different tone from the one he had used before.

"My name is Captain Jinks, and I am chief of the gang of marauders known as the Horse Marines. I have been down at Red Bend, on the lookout for a man of wealth who was expected there several days ago. His name is Cyrus Dabney, and I have been told that he carries a little mine of wealth with him. Of course, my intention is to hold him up as soon

as I meet him, but, unfortunately, I was too late to catch him at the Bend. He had already left that place, and I am on my way, now, to Glory Flat, to see if I cannot catch him there. As I supposed you would extend to me the courtesies of the profession I did not think it worth while to get down when you ordered the rest to vacate the coach. As for this other man here, I know nothing about him. Let him talk for himself."

"Why, you infernal liar!" shouted the other, when thus appealed to. "There isn't a word of truth in what you are saying, and nobody but a bloody detective would or could conjure up such a yarn. I am Captain Jinks myself, and I have been at Red Bend; but it was not for Cyrus Dabney, by a long shot. It was for a lady, who was expected at the Bend, and as I could hear nothing of her there I started for Glory Flat, which is the next most likely spot to look for her. That's the square truth, and I'll tack a little bit of advice to the end of it. If you don't scoop this man in he will do you some harm. He's looking for a man, of course, but the first letter of his name spells road-agent. It's either you or me that he is after, and if you don't take him in out of the damp I'll be after him myself, before this coach goes a foot further."

"That's more wind than religion, if I ain't a heap ways off," put in the first Captain Jinks, before Captain Flash could have the chance of saying a word. "But if you mean it for business, what's the matter with settling it right here and now, with this gentleman to see fair play? I have heard of a sheep-stealing, moon-eyed impostor that was blustering around, stealing my name, and trying to steal the good-will of my business. If you are the man, I am ready for you—with knife or pistol, just as you want to have it. Oh, I have been having my eye on you all the way along, and I meant to give you Hail Columby before this hearse got into corral."

"I'm your mutton. Step back five paces and begin to shoot!" And the speaker whipped out a pair of revolvers, and sprung backward, the movements being duplicated by the other with clock-like precision.

CHAPTER II.

THE MAGIC OF THE "DROP."

It looked much as though the two men were in deadly earnest, and when the hammers of the four revolvers went back the time for Captain Flash to interfere seemed to him to have arrived. So far he had rather been taking it for granted that he was to meet with no resistance from the men, and the thought of their being armed had not crossed his mind. Some time had elapsed since any actual resistance had been made when he held up a coach, and perhaps he was getting a little careless.

When the pistols came out it struck him that these men were as likely to use them against him as against each other.

"Up with your hands!" he shouted. "If there is to be any fighting here you can count on doing it with me—till I am done with you, at any rate. You don't get up such a scene as this without some reason, and two men who would engineer it through are fools enough to be dangerous. You hear me?"

"We hear you," returned the first Captain Jinks, returning to his easy drawl, "and we don't think you are any bigger fool than we are. The other man has you lined, and when you pull trigger he'll begin to shoot. And to continue with the gospel truth, for the present I'm sailing in about the same boat. Any man who will attempt to interfere between two gentlemen, who are engaged in settling an affair of honor, is too low-down to live, and ought to be exterminated. We have you about where we want you. Hands up yourself, mister!"

Under such circumstances Captain Flash thought very rapidly and checked the movement of his hands toward his belt. No two men would be apt to start such a game in front of him unless they had it arranged beforehand and were sure of themselves. He was in a trap of some kind and he had better be trying to get out himself, and put the others in his place. One thing he was reasonably certain of: if he made a movement now, the threat he had just heard would be no idle one. The men had him between them and had him lined. In addition, the one was behind the stage while the other was protected from his men by a convenient tree. They had the chance to riddle him before they could be reached by his own men who would not be apt to move without orders. Altogether, he had never before got in quite such a fix, or been so careless. How he had so underrated them he did not stop just then to examine.

When he spoke, however, he was as cool as an iceberg.

"Gentlemen, I never was slow to recognize the drop when it was on me, and I never failed to get the advantage on my side in a reasonably short time. The advantage that I always had was, that though life is as sweet to me as it is to any man, I can't afford to surrender. I am willing to temporize, however, until I can see

what you want. We may come to terms, after all."

"That's white, ain't it, pard?" asked the second Captain Jinks, speaking to his late seeming antagonist. "Looks like if you and I chip in together we can sweep the deck. You talk. I have him covered, sure."

"I don't want him, and if he had left me alone I shouldn't have interfered with him. Suppose we swear him in and let him go. If he has made a mistake, it is what we are all liable to do, and one can overlook a great deal in a man with the reputation of Captain Flash."

"You seem to know a good deal about him; what is his word worth? How is his reputation for truth and veracity?"

"Good as wheat. If he pledged himself to turn circuit-rider to-night, you would find him expounding a little flock to-morrow. Oh, Captain Flash is a man to tie to, every time, and don't you forget it! If he says 'Shake,' I am willing to go sit down on the bank yonder, and wait till he goes through the whole outfit. I am in no such great hurry. Or I can stroll along down the road till the hearse catches up. I don't know that anything can be done with a fellow for not shooting a road-agent when he has the chance."

"In heaven's name, go then!" exclaimed the captain. "I have no use for either of you; so, take the other Captain Jinks along. Neither of you answers to the description of the party I'm most anxious to see; and as for this truck here, I shall go through it as a matter of business and then turn them loose. There won't be much profit in the operation, but it is a necessity of the profession."

"All fair and square, that offer, is it?"

"Honor bright!"

"Then, hang me if I don't accept the proposition! Good-evening, and prosperity be with you."

This Captain Jinks audibly uncocked his revolvers, thrust them carelessly into the legs of his boots, and strolled off down the road, without even a parting look at the late fellow passengers, who were still ranged in the ranks in which Flash had formed them.

"And I'm with you," put in the other captain, following suit, stalking away without hesitation or delay. The first one was proceeding at a moderate gait, and in the course of a few minutes was overhauled.

So long as they were in sight of the road-agents nothing was said between the two, who walked along side by side, without looking back or at each other. When they had dropped out of view at the first bend of the trail they accelerated their speed a little, until they had such an effing that even a timid man might consider himself well out of danger. Then they halted, and looked at each other.

"Look here!" said the man who had been second in claiming the name of Captain Jinks; "what's your little game, now?"

"The game is made and I'm ready for a new deal. I got out of it without burning powder, which was a great deal more than I expected when the bold Captain Flash came bounding into the coach."

"But, it won't take him long to get out of his generous notion, and come back on us to see what we are made of. And even two good men will not be likely to get the drop on him twice in the same day."

"Right you are, and I wouldn't be surprised if he was coming now. I hear a noise in that direction. Have you anything to propose?"

"Fix it to suit yourself. I am in the mix with you, and will play follow your leader as long as it suits you. Only, we don't want to throw off on the passengers. If they can't take care of themselves we will have to act guardian."

"Oh, well! I don't want to crowd you if you don't feel like going. Shall we take to the brush till we can see what is in the wind; or, shall we fight it out on this line if it takes all summer? Of course, I can go it alone, but as we seem to be in this swim together I don't see why we shouldn't work on the same level."

"Brush has it; and if you say so we'll stick till the last horn blows, or we get top-side gallop, as the Chinamen have it. Here goes!"

And into the brush he darted, closely followed by the other, just as the stage came into view, Jerry cracking his whip, while the horses were stretching themselves out at a steady gallop.

"How was it? Do you think they saw us?" asked Jinks, Number One.

"Don't know; but if that ain't Captain Flash and his crew I am away off. Look out for fun! This time we must salivate them, for they are coming for our hair on general principles."

"And the captain looks very much in earnest. I can see him just behind Jerry. Look at him straining his eyes down the road. Shall I drop a leader, or only give a hail for Hickson to put down brakes, and take a long pull, a strong pull, and a pull altogether?"

"You can see how he looks—in a horn! But, what the thunder you talking about? The less you say to 'em the better. What do you think of doing?"

"Hold 'em up, of course! Turn about is fair play. If it isn't I want to know. We may as well show 'em how Captain Jinks does these

things. Here they are! Hold hard, all! Down with your brakes, Jerry; and the rest of you hold up your hands! We have you lined, and the first man that tries to pick trigger goes up the flume, with the blowers on."

And then the Captain Jinks that was talking did a very neat thing in the shooting line. He saw the silvering moonlight that was reflected back from the shining barrel of the revolver that Flash held in his hand, and throwing up the weapon in his own grip, took a snap-shot at the road-raider's weapon.

Jerry had obeyed orders as usual. When he heard the cry of "Hands up!" he never questioned the authority of the speaker. In fact, he had said often that he would sooner pull up on a dozen false alarms than try to go through once at the wrong time. He had not recognized the sharp, all-business tones of the man who addressed him, and if he had it would have made no difference. Of course the halt played into the hand of Captain Jinks very nicely, for it gave him a stationary mark, and his bullet struck squarely on the barrel, knocking the weapon out of the hand of the road-agent.

"Don't you pull another iron," added the marksman, speaking still more sharply. "This time we are doing the talking, and it's your turn to knuckle under or croak. Ah, would you?"

And again this marvelous pistol-shot let loose.

There were four men besides the captain, two inside and one outside. As one of the latter attempted to roll off on the other side a bullet struck him, and with a howl he dropped in a heap, shrieking something about his leg. He had very little nerve for an outlaw.

Then the other Captain Jinks, who had shifted his position while this was going on, and was pretty well screened, anyhow, put in a few remarks:

"The fact is, captain, we have you about where we want you. You have gone back on your bargain, and that lets us out on ours. There's no use to wiggle. You are going to find out how it feels yourself. We can shoot to a hair, and we'll do it if you don't knuckle. If you come down here we'll just relieve you of your superfluous change and let you go. But as we have tripped up on the game we were looking for, you can bet your bottom dollar we're not throwing away a chance to turn an honest penny in another direction. That's solid. How do you want it?"

Jerry Hickson had already wound the lines around the brake and dropped out of harm's way. He scudded off into the bushes on the other side of the road, and then tore away at a great rate until he thought he was fairly out of the way of any chance shots. The road-agents were not inclined to sit still, but at the very instant that the stage-door began to open, a well-directed shot lodged in it, so near to the hand of the man behind it that he reconsidered his intentions and shrunk back, while the captain's companion evidently looked to him for orders.

The captain was somewhat dazed. When the pistol was torn from his hand, the but of it had struck him on his head, and though it had not done any serious damage, the blow for a moment rendered him all abroad. By the time he had fully recovered his senses the second speaker of the Jinkses was talking, and seemed to understand that the game was in their own hands.

The captain recognized the fact, also. True, there were still three men at his command; but then, the coach stood in the bright moonlight, while the two were in the shadows. He had already held just such an advantage, and knew what it amounted to. Reluctantly he once more acknowledged the potency of the drop, and gave in.

"What is it that you want? This is twice you have got away with my luggage, and that just too easy. If you are a detective I may as well have it finished up now, and go out of the dew. It is death anyhow, I suppose."

"Detectives, nothing! We are the bloodiest kind of road-agents, and we are going for your pockets, right now. There has been talk enough to rob a wagon train; from now on it is business, chuck up! Shell or cash in! Hands up, you, Captain Flash, and step down there in the next half-second. Now then, keep them 'way up, and come this way!"

The captain hesitated no longer. He was pretty sure that if he obeyed orders he was in no great personal danger, if any. It was horribly galling to his pride; but then, life was sweet, and after he had shown his hand by coming in pursuit of these men he was sure that they would be as good as their word. He stepped on until he got under the broad belt of shadow. Then, before he saw any one, he felt the muzzle of a revolver at his forehead.

"Keep cool and you will be all right," whispered a tense voice; "but kick and you go where the dogs won't bite. We'll protect ourselves by putting you out of the reach of harm for a little while. Next!"

And so, one at a time, the road-agents filed into the shadows, covered by the deadly muzzles, and were met and bound.

"And now, I reckon," said the senior Captain

Jinks, "we will take the hearse and go back to look for the cargo. There can't be more than a couple of the gang left behind, and we ought to be able for them."

CHAPTER III.

MOSES COMES TO THE FRONT.

To go back a little: Captain Flash saw the two men stalk down the road with some late-found misgivings that perhaps he had made a mistake in allowing them to march out with the honors of war. He even had half a notion at one time to send several of his men to recall them—or attend to planting them where they fell, in case they objected to the trouble of a return.

He argued with himself, however, that perhaps it would be better to first finish the matter in hand; and then, if it should seem good, on second thoughts, to see more of them, he could follow in force.

He turned to the line of the passengers, who had been watching the proceedings with much interest, and more curiosity.

Again he scanned the row of faces earnestly; and evidently with disappointment. Then he turned to Hickson.

"See here, Jerry. You ought to have a man somewhere in the cargo, who isn't in the line. Where did you leave him? There is no use to tell me you don't know anything about him. I had the news almost as soon as you rolled out of Red Bend, and my informant was a man who never makes any mistakes. The man was going through—had to go through. When he once got this far on the journey there would be no backing out. He may not have much pluck, but there was too much money in the thing to let go his grip, now. There was never a Jew in Christendom who would not follow a dollar, if it rolled ahead of him into Hades."

"Ho!" exclaimed Jerry, with the air of a man who had just thought of something important, and was correspondingly relieved; "is that what you are after? Why didn't you say so at fu'st? Of course ther' wer' a sheeny aboard when we left ther Bend, but that wer' so fur back I'd clean forgot all about him. We hadn't got three miles out when he began to grunt, an' when I wanted ter know what ailed Hanner he swore he wer' too sick ter travel, an' ther hearse wer' too full fur comfort, an' he'd rather walk, ary how. It wer' just about ther time you wer' talkin' about that smoke yer see'd on top ov Red P'int," he continued, turning to one of the outside passengers. "Don't yer recomember? He slid out, an' said he'd foot it back to the Bend, ef he didn't git no better soon. An' ef he did, ther company might go ter thunder, ary how. Ef he war in a civilized country he'd sue 'em fur over-crowdin', an' try an opperision line ther next time. I thought it war kinder funny how he wer' blowin' his bazoo, but I never hed sense ernuff ter look inside. That's just what. Yer mind, some one looked back ez we wer' roundin' ther turn, an' he wer' sittin' on a bank, along the roadside, an' they sed he looked too sick."

"How's that for gospel?" asked Flash, turning sharply and suddenly to the man who had already, for the sake of his wife and family, given the information in regard to the two men who claimed the name of Jinks.

"I guess it's about a true bill. I saw him lean over and hand one of those men that Jerry don't know anything about a package, that the fellow shoved away into his pocket without a word. Then he began to grumble, yelled at the driver, and rolled out. He's back in Red Bend by this time, sure enough."

"He gave one of those men a package. You are sure of that?"

"Sure enough to bet my head on it."

"Which one was it?"

"Now you got me. They were so much alike that I couldn't tell 't'other from which when they was once out of the stage."

"And they are off toward the Bend with the boodle!" exclaimed the captain, again getting excited.

"Here, you! Numbers One and Two, just hold this line together, and the first man or woman that tries to step out, or lets down a hand, shoot to kill. The rest of you pile on the hearse. They can't have got far down the road, and we'll overhaul them yet. They will never suspect anything when they hear the coach coming, except that we have turned it back, as we always do; and Jerry, you tumble up on the box, as quick as lightning, and lay the string on for all that is out. If we catch them it's all right. If we don't, I'll have satisfaction out of you, if I don't get it anywhere else. Sabbe!"

Jerry sabbeed only too well what was meant, and resumed the ribbons in double-quick time; the men tumbled to their places as fast as they could, and with Captain Flash sitting with drawn revolver, to see that the driver acted squarely with his new cargo, and everybody in a state of the highest excitement, the coach dashed away in the direction taken by the two men, whose capture seemed to be of such high importance.

During this course of events the passengers who were not directly included in the conversa-

tion remained as meek as lambs. Their hands were up, or supposed to be up; and they said not a word to each other, or to any one else.

When the captain had taken his departure they were in no better plight—if as good. Before, they had a hope that the trouble would soon be over, and they would be allowed to continue their journey. Now there was no telling when the coach would be back—if at all—and meantime their arms were getting most wonderfully tired, to say nothing of the increasing strain on their nerves. The two guards were very watchful, and from their position on the flanks could see the least movement, and would no doubt shoot at the most trifling cause. Altogether, it was not to be wondered at that there were some very long faces in the outfit.

For a while the guards were extremely vigilant. They kept their eyes fixed on the passengers as though they expected to see them break away in a drove, and were ready to shoot on the slightest provocation. As the moments passed, however, and they found what a tractable lot they had to deal with, they became a little less cautious. They seated themselves on the ground, resting their pistols over their knees, and whiled away the time with a little general conversation that was more edifying than pleasant to the other listeners.

Still there was nothing heard from the coach; and by and by the two began to move uneasily, and give other evidences of anxiety.

"Seems to me the boss is a long time getting on the back track. He must want to keep us here all night. Tell you what, if he has reached the boodle it's ten to one that he ain't a carin' about this little dad of wealth that's to be raked in here; and he don't care a continental about us, either. He will just leave us in the lurch, and go along with what he has got. There will be a bigger pile to each man if there are two less to divide it with. Say, what's the matter with our going through this outfit? If he comes back it's all ready then to make a start. And if he don't come back I reckon we won't be quite as bad off as we might be."

"Kayrect to a dot. My notion prezactly. Jest you pull that other barker ov yourn, an' keep 'em all kivered while I pass around the hat. This hyer collection will be a regular clean-up ov all the ore in sight, if I know meself. It'll be a long time afore we could git the same congregation together ag'in, an' we want 'em to be lib' while they're at it. Here, you, now! First! Shuck yerself ov all yer vall'ybles, an' be too quick about it."

The fellow started out with the best of intentions, a revolver in one hand, and his hat in the other.

"We never 'xpect ter make a clean swoop ther fu'st round. Ef it looks short, ez mostly it do, we go 'round ag'in, an' call fur more, purty loud. You jest drop in what yer thinks best fur ther present, an' we'll see ter gettin' ther rest later on."

With a deep sigh the passenger at the head of the line put his hand into his pocket, withdrew a wallet that looked as though it might be bursting with its fatness, and was about to drop it into the ragged head-gear, when there came an interruption not down on the bills. Without any previous warning the two Captain Jinks appeared almost within reaching distance of the road-agents, and said their say after their own peculiarly convincing manner.

"Hold hard, Johnny! You don't want that wallet any more than you want half an ounce of lead in the inside of that thick head of yours. No fooling, now; but knuckle! We have you very foul."

That for the man who was reaching for the wealth of the passenger; while the other Captain Jinks was more terse, but every whit as intelligible. He cocked his pistol at the ear of the second outlaw and grated:

"Drop your gun and throw up your hands, or go over the range. We swept up the boss and his gang; what sort of a mouthful do you think we could get out of you?"

"Holy smoke!" gasped the road-agent who was taking up the enforced collection.

"It's ther Capt'n Jinkses, theirselves! Ef they could scoop Flash, whar would we come in at ef we pulled ag'in' ther britchin'? I cave."

He dropped hat and revolver without delay, and held his hands up with the same graceful readiness that he had seen displayed upon more than one occasion when he was on the side potential.

His partner followed suit so rapidly that it was an open question whether, indeed, he had not been a little previous. There was all the difference in the world between holding a revolver at the heads of a lot of unarmed passengers, handed over already under cow, and having the revolvers held at them.

At this there was a regular whoop of joy from the passengers, who broke line immediately, and ready to inflict condign punishment on the rascals, now that they seemed to be safely delivered into their hands.

"Oh, just hold up a bit," laughed Captain Jinks number one. "We're running this thing, and you don't know what else is to come of it. Perhaps we are going to go through the whole outfit ourselves. If we try it on you will think

you have got out of the fryingpan into the fire, sure. For the present we will take care of these young men, and when we want any help we'll let you know. Just gather yourselves together and wagon on down to the vehicle. We left it a little ways down the road, while we came on to see what was going on here. Excuse me, miss, I didn't think of your being in the party. Allow me. The excitement has been a little too much for you, I am afraid. If you would lean a trifle on my arm you would find it easier to reach the coach, where you will have a chance to take a more comfortable rest."

He started forward as he spoke, and caught, in a protecting, fatherly sort of way, the form of a young lady who was reeling back, and who would otherwise no doubt have fallen. She was one of the inside passengers, and had hitherto carried herself as bravely as the best of them. Now either the reaction or the fatigue was too much for her.

"Forward march!" ordered the other Jinks, speaking to his two captives, and the procession started for the coach, the outlines of which could now be dimly seen in the distance.

The vehicle was reached without any incident, and the somewhat revived young lady was deposited within, the rest taking their places in haste.

Jerry Hickson was there, holding the ribbons—for the two men had picked him up along the road, after he had seen the discomfiture of Captain Flash, and that the danger was over for the present. There was some confusion among the passengers, but Jerry was not caring for anything but the making of an early start. He had his lines drawn up, all ready to give the word to go as soon as the task of binding the outlaws to convenient trees was completed by the gentlemen of the name of Jinks. Everybody was more or less electrified at hearing a voice that had something of a familiar sound, exclaiming:

"I say, my tears, let me oudt, let me oudt! I am almost smoddered in here."

"Just one moment, Moses, and we will be with you. We must finish up the job on hand before we attend to you. It will only take a little longer. One thing at a time."

Almost by the time he finished speaking the nearest Captain Jinks had tied the last knot that held his man fast. Then he moved toward the boot of the stage. A few buckles were loosened, and out rolled a little, bent, and apparently somewhat decrepit old man, who flung his arms around the other, exclaiming:

"Oh, dot vos eggselement, mine friendt; but I vos so skeered that vonce or twicdt I thought I would certainly scream."

"Scream, then, Moses! There is no particular reason why you shouldn't. We're jay-bird flickers. Flash is behind us, and the way is open to Glory Flat at last."

CHAPTER IV.

AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE STANDS ASIDE.

On the porch of the "Happy Hope" Hotel at Glory Flat, sat two men, engaged in a low, but earnest conversation.

The hour was late, the porch deserted by all save themselves, and they occupied a corner at one end, where there was little danger of being spied upon, or overheard, but their tones were low, and from time to time they cast cautious glances around, to make sure that there was no one lingering near, to get an inkling of what was being said.

There was quite a contrast in the appearance of the two. The one who, so to speak, held the floor, was a tall, well-formed man, dressed in a neat, business suit that set off his fine shape to the best advantage. There was a certain amount of power indicated in his appearance, which those who knew Nelson Burden best were always willing to give him credit for. In courtesy he was generally spoken of, or to, as "Judge;" but it was by no means certain that he had ever been attached to the legal profession; and at present he was simply a leading citizen of Glory Flat, of uncertain occupation but of considerable popularity.

The other individual was Mr. Tite Thompson, a gambler, sport and man about town. He was a wicked little fellow, in spite of his good looks, and fine raiment. He was not so little as he looked, either. He kept his weight to himself; but he was one of the big little men, who are very deceiving in their looks. All that did not make much difference, however. He was acknowledged to be so desperately bad when he got into a difficulty—to be such a hard hitter, and such a perfect master of knife and pistol, that, unless a man who knew him was bent on suicide, he gave Tite Thompson a wide berth when he was in one of his surly humors. He had white hands, a clear complexion, soft blue eyes, an aquiline nose, and firm set mouth which the gentle smile that was generally playing around it did not disarm of dangerous suggestiveness.

So far as was known the two were simply acquaintances, without any common interests; and the whole town would not have thought anything of it if they had seen the two chatting familiarly on the porch in the moonlight.

"I wish I had the same confidence in Flash that you seem to have," said Thompson, in an-

swer to what the Judge had been saying. "I know he's a good man, and all that, but I fancy that when he sees a chance to feather his own nest he will do it, without consideration for his neighbors. If he has made the haul he will be out of sight and over the border with the boodle before you catch another glimpse of him. If not, why not?"

"Because he daren't!" responded the Judge, speaking thoughtfully, and as if examining his mind for confirmation as he went along.

"He has an average memory, and knows me of old. There never was a man who went back on me that I did not hunt down or even-up with sooner or later. I could hang him without getting myself into any particular trouble. It is more of a question in my mind whether he will make the raffle, or whether we will have to be on the lookout, to finish up the job here, after all."

"If the party comes through he will be apt to get them. Fact is, I don't see how he is going to miss. It's all right, I suppose; but to put fifty thousand dollars into the hands of a road-agent, and ask him to be strictly honest looks like a bit of tomfoolery. I think I would rather risk gathering in the boodle myself."

"Don't croak. The stage will be here soon, and of course we will then know all about it."

"And if the captain has made a miss of it I suppose we are to wait to take our directions from you—unless you have them all ready mapped out. In that case you had better give me an outline now. He will let no grass grow under his feet by staying in the Flat. There is no time for him to lose."

"That's so; if he wants to get through by the twenty-first. And that is where we have him. He can't take time to dodge. He must travel as the crow flies, or he will miss his chance. Anywhere along that line we are bound to take him. If he slips by Flash it will leave that gentleman entirely out of the game, if I choose to drop him, and he does not know enough out of the matter to do more than follow as I pull the strings. If I could get up a plausible reason for being out of town I wouldn't mind following, myself. It would be simpler to do the job the other side of the border, anyhow. And it has been some little time since I had an adventure. Positively, it would be a temptation."

The gambler looked curiously at his companion, whose face was revealing itself in the moonshine.

"Saphirenstein has a daughter, has he not?" he asked, in a tone that might mean much or nothing.

"It's so reported."

"Handsome, eh?"

"According to reputation. I am not a judge of such matters. I steer clear of the sex. It is probably the reason I have never been wrecked."

"No chance, I suppose, that she will be along with the old man. If she was it might make the job a little simpler. She might be easier to corral than the diamonds."

Lightly as Thompson spoke, he was watching the judge more narrowly than ever, and caught the little start which most men would have missed. He was pretty certain, then, that the Judge had knowledge that was gained neither by report nor by reputation. His suspicions might be correct after all. Yet there was nothing unusual in Burden's voice as he answered:

"I only wish she was along. You can bet it would make a difference in the programme. But he is too wily an old fox to risk all his jewels in the same boat."

"No use to talk it over till we see how things have gone. If I am not mistaken there comes Jerry now. When he comes in we will know what has to be done."

Sure enough, the stage was in hearing distance, and bowling along as merrily as though there were no such things as road-agents, or dangerous places on the way.

Jerry came up to the porch with a swirl. Half a dozen loungers appeared as if by magic, and the landlord came bustling out.

"Hyar we be, two hours late, but sound in wind, limb, and bottom. Had an interview with Captain Flash, and just pulled the wool over his eyes two times hand-running. Not a dime missin', though; an' ther treasure box are all safe, after ther agents had a fair grip on it. Oh, it war only too elegant! Come inside, an' you'll hear all about it."

That was the way Jerry spoke as he climbed down from his perch, answering two or three curious questioners.

Meantime the door was opened, and the inside passengers began to file out. First of all, a good-looking young man sprang to the ground. He was one of the men who had claimed the name of Jinks, and he held the door open politely, while looking into the vehicle.

"Safe we are, miss; here at last. Hope your troubles are over, for the present, anyhow. Allow me."

A feminine voice answered something from the inside; and then out stepped the same young lady who had almost fainted when the affair with the road-agents had been definitely concluded. At that time she was fairly well muffled up in her cloak, and as she had worn a veil

during the ride, few of the passengers had been lucky enough to get even a glimpse of her face. Now, the cloak had dropped from her shoulders, the veil had been swept aside, and as she came lightly to the ground, aided by the outstretched hand of Captain Jinks, the bright moonlight fell full on her face, showing it in all its dark but wonderful beauty.

It was only for an instant those features were visible, but that was long enough to wring from the lips of Judge Burden a low exclamation of surprise, which was heard only by his companion on the further end of the porch. Then he turned to Tite Thompson with a strange look on his features as he muttered:

"For a chance shot you hit pretty near center, a moment ago. If my eyes haven't gone back on me a good deal further than they are in the habit of doing, that is old Saphirenstein's daughter."

"And by the holy ages! there is, the infernal Hebrew himself! Flash has missed his swoop, for once, and it is time for us to begin to think what comes next. Who's the sport that is doing the agreeable? And where does he come into the outfit? Looks as though I ought to know him. I'll swear I have seen his face somewhere; but I can't place him, though I'll bet a case or two, that he was a bad man where he came from. He carries himself as though he might be hard to handle. You know who he is?"

"Know who he is?" growled Burden, who by this time was examining the face of the sportive looking stranger. "You bet I know who it is; or it's his ghost, perhaps. I thought the man himself was dead enough, a year ago. It's the sport that raised Cain, down on the Feather River, a few years ago. I knew him then, and by heavens, he knew me. You are right about his being a bad man to handle. If Saphirenstein has brought him along as a body-guard we are not going to have a walk-over."

"But his name, man, his name. I am not so sure but what I know him myself, and I will be sure if I once hear his handle."

"Oh, he had half a dozen names, and any of them was no doubt wide enough of the mark. They called him 'The All-around Sport,' and 'Captain Jinks,' once in a while; but the name that he answered to was, Wheeler Wilson."

"I know who you mean, now; but, ain't you a little off? That fellow is after his style, but he don't seem quite the original article."

"Right you are, Titus," responded the Judge as the second sport appeared. "If there is any doubt about him, there must come the genuine Jinks. I tell you, all these people don't meet here for nothing. It looks as though there was going to be a harder row to hoe than we had been counting on. But, fifty thousand dollars is a stake worth playing for; and if the sports come in the road they will have to be removed, that is all. Now, let's step forward and hear the news. We may be able to tell better, then, what all this means."

"All right. I can't say much for the rest, but if that sport who got out first isn't gone, and far gone, on the handsome Jewess, I don't know the symptoms when I see them. Pity for him, too. He will feel awful streaked when some one cuts him out. Which is to be the happy man for the operation, you or I? I swear, I wouldn't care to run the chances, and give up my other stakes in the game if I won."

"I suppose," answered the Judge dryly, and without further remark he made his way toward the other end of the porch.

There was some little delay about the procession starting for the inside of the hotel, the passengers remaining huddled around the stage until all debarked, and then starting in a body. What puzzled the Judge was the fact that the young lady never even glanced at Saphirenstein, and kept by the side of the All-around Sport as though she had no other protector.

"Of course, I cannot be mistaken," muttered Burden, as he noted this, and edged in so that he must come about face to face with her as she stepped up on the porch. "If I am I will soon know it. I don't think even her nerve would carry her through the meeting if she does not suspect that I am here."

That she saw him now could not be doubted, for she looked up coldly into his face, and then made a brief pause, to give him time to step out of her way.

He did not take advantage of the permission, for he remained standing directly in her path, and there was less than his usual courtesy in the way he spoke as he addressed her.

"It strikes me, Miss Rebecca, that you have a poorer memory than ever, the way you seem to forget old friends. Welcome to the Flat, though; and if I can be of any service to you, command me as of old."

"You must be mistaken, sir. I do not remember to have ever seen you before. Will you please stand aside?"

"I can remember the time when you were not quite so disdainful. Perhaps you will find, before you have done with Glory Flat, that a gentleman offering his assistance and protection is not altogether to be despised."

"Especially when he knows how to dispose of such cattle as you are," added the All-around

Sport who had the young lady in charge; and as he spoke he suddenly, though without apparent haste, caught Judge Burden by collar and thigh, and with the easiest air in the world flung him over the railing to the ground below where stood the other sport.

"Now, miss," he added, turning back to the young lady, "here is the landlord. Will you please follow him in while I look after the other man?"

CHAPTER V.

FRANK—OF THE ANTELOPE.

"EASY by jerks—just as e-a-s-y!" drawled the second of the All-around Sports, as the Judge dropped right into his arms, without having received any particular damage.

"There! You are right side up again; and, I see, ready for business. That is the trouble with you Western men. You never get fairly out of one scrape before you rush head-first into another. I might as well have let you drop, and break your neck. Don't you know he will blow you cold if you monkey around him? He is a bad man, a very bad man, from away the other side of Bodie. I wouldn't now; I really wouldn't."

The Judge had straightened up, and flung himself out of the arms of the sport, at the same time throwing his hand back in search of his revolver. The sport did not seem to move, and yet, before the revolver was out of the scabbard it was twisted out of Burden's fingers, and tossed to one side.

Although Burden had the reputation of being an unpleasant man to have a difficulty with, and had hitherto sustained it well enough, these two men seemed either of them able to handle him.

Tite Thompson was in a quandary. He had taken a step toward the man on the porch, with the idea of attracting his attention; but when he saw what was going on below he changed his mind. The Judge was served about right, anyhow, and he did not propose to take the quarrel out of his hands. The two sports must be working together, and if he took charge of the one the other would hustle the Judge through all the faster, and then turn his attention to him.

After that the trouble would be—the cause of the riot. Glory Flat was chivalrous, and there might be a town meeting if any one shot down a stranger while defending a lady from what might well be construed as an insult. It would be altogether better to bide their time, and get even in the natural course of events. The All-around Sport was not likely to be on any especial good behavior, and if he was at all equal to his reputation it would not be hard to find an occasion for saying something unpleasant to him later on.

The Judge, not so philosophical, was almost wild with concentrated rage. He said nothing, but his face whitened, and his massive jaws shut tightly, while his fist went back to his shoulder. He was just ready to strike. For the moment he forgot the man on the porch, and was ready to concentrate all of his wrath on the sport in front of him.

"Not too fast, old man. My name is Wheeler Wilson, and I suspect that you know me, of old. Please attend to my case first before you begin on any outside rackets. If you have anything to say to any one, say it to me. After that, if there is any breath left you can use it attending to the wants of that other gentleman, who resembles your humble servant. Chip, or draw out of the game! I am not holding any drop, and you have as good a chance as I have."

The voice, coming from the porch, recalled the Judge to himself. He glanced upward, and saw the sport smiling down on him, his arms folded on the rail against which he leaned. And he saw, too, behind him, Tite Thompson, making a sign to him to hold hard, and keep his temper. In an instant he regained his self-possession.

"Much obliged, gentlemen, but I seem to be between two fires, and not much show for my white alley. It's not exactly my way of doing business. If either of you gentlemen will step out into the street, and let some one drop a hat, I think the matter can be settled as comfortably as could be desired. If not, we will drop the thing right here. I'm not as mad as I was a minute ago."

"Spoken like a man of sense. Come up and shake for the sake of old times. It's the first I have seen or heard of you since we parted on the Plumas, more years ago than I care to remember."

Of course, all this was not passing unnoticed. The crowd which had greeted the appearance of the stage was still on hand, and had transferred their attention from the other passengers to the little affair that appeared to be on the tapis. Even Jerry Hickson found that he was forgotten, and stalked into the office in something like dudgeon, then he had curiosity enough to peer out of the window, mentally resolving that if there were any odds going on the Glory Flat man he would be willing to invest all his loose change on the All-around Sports.

It was, then, something of a surprise to see the Judge calmly step up on the porch and extend his hand to the stranger who had but just handled him so roughly. It was looked upon as

rather a large thing to do, under the circumstances, since no one had any doubt about the courage of Nelson Burden; and from that time on the cause of the quarrel was pretty generally forgotten. The Judge introduced Titus Thompson to the sport, and he in turn introduced the second sport under the name of Edgar Arden; then everybody adjourned to the inside of the ranch, unconscious of the fact that a handsome young woman had all the time been watching them. A cold smile curved her handsome lips as she saw that apparent fraternization, and she muttered to herself:

"He is no better than the others. When it comes to lead and steel he would prefer to take the side of safety, even when he pretends to be backing a woman's quarrel. So be it. I shall know how far to trust you, Mr. Wheeler Wilson."

Fine in front of the bar, and the complete story of how Captain Flash had been baffled came out, the All-around Sports became regular heroes. If Martin Merrick, the landlord, had not come to call the travelers to supper there is no telling how high the enthusiasm would have mounted.

At the table neither Saphirenstein nor the beautiful brunette were visible. The hour was late, and both of them preferred to retire to rest at once. The others, however, did ample justice to the heavy meal set before them; and after it was over the most of the party strolled back to the bar-room. The two sports arose from the table last, and passed out of the room together.

"You understand, of course, that Nelse Burden is not done with us yet, by a long shot. He is a tolerably wise man, but he would never have let up if he hadn't thought there was more to be made by the doing of it. He means to have a sure thing of it the next time and if you don't watch sharp he will. I have seen the gentleman before."

"Perhaps that is one reason why he would like to have you out of the way now. He was looking for a row when he stepped out to the head of the porch. He got it such a heap sight quicker than he expected that he didn't get in his work according to schedule. But if I hadn't been ready with a little diversion for him when he landed, he and that gambler friend of his would have double-teamed you, sure as preaching. Of course, I am looking for both of them; but that won't prevent a glance around the town. I have heard of the Flat, and I want to see what it looks like by lamplight."

"I supposed you had caught on; but all the same, a word of friendly warning was about the square thing. As for the Flat—I have no ambition to paint it red to-night. It's profit I am after when I go out on an expedition, and something tells me that there is nothing to be made by me here, and to-night."

"Oh, hang the prophets! It's fun that I am after, and I reckon that there will be bushels of it when that young sport and I met. I kind of half wish that you were going along, too. We seem to be elected to pull in the same boat, and I don't know how the luck will run if we split off now."

"Just about the same as if we had never met at all. I always manage to come out right side up; and I think you are built after the same pattern. Be good to yourself, and if you get back all correct I will see you later. But look out for Tite Thompson. There may be worse little men, but I have not seen them."

Arden laughed as he turned away; though his face was quite sober an instant later, as he passed out of the house, without visiting the bar-room at all.

"According to your size I don't know that Tite has much to brag on, Wheeler Wilson. At least, when you hear the news in the morning, I think you will be apt to say something that will be out of the general run of prayers. You may be square enough; but I am not trusting any one very deeply till this racket is played out—and to me it looks as though it was only just begun."

Glory Flat was not a large town, but it was a live one, and though the hour was late when Edgar Arden stepped out into the street, it had no deserted look. The saloons—of which the town had more than its fair proportion, even for a Western village—were in full blast, and there were numerous pedestrians, passing to and fro between them.

For a moment he hesitated, as though not altogether certain which way to turn. Then he strolled away in an aimless sort of fashion, willing to let chance direct his footsteps.

Chance directed his footsteps to the saloon that was a hundred yards down the street, and which bore over the door, and under the big red light at the entrance, the name, "The Antelope."

From what he could see of it, from the outside it appeared to be about the sort of place that would suit an all-around sport, and after a glance through the open door he quietly entered.

Things were running along inside in a way that should gladden the heart of a proprietor. Plenty of the boys were there, and they were spending their money with a steady looseness that bid fair to fill the coffers of the house.

There was also a large sprinkling of the rough element, as could be told even by a tyro; but for the present all was serene. Cards were dropping at the smaller tables, and over at the rear of the room faro flourished. The sport dropped into a seat near the door and looked around.

"Hi! What is this?" he muttered to himself, and he stared at the person who stood behind the bar with the air of one who was monarch of all there was to be surveyed.

The proprietor was a woman.

"Lookin' at ther Queen ov ther Flat, be yer, stranger, rasped a voice at his side. "That's all right; but don't yer look too long. Ther boys be mighty jealous ov strangers, an' ther's bin more ner one corpus on ther floor. Be you goin' ter live 'round byer?"

Arden looked up at the speaker. The fellow was a battered, dilapidated, trampish-looking individual, who appeared to have had decidedly more whisky than was good for him. He bore the look of the sport with an owl's gravity, and slowly rocked to and fro while waiting for an answer. He was not the sort of looking fellow that a man of Arden's caliber would be apt to be intimate with, and Edgar was about to cut him off with a sharp word, when something in the man's appearance attracted his attention, and he reconsidered his determination.

"I am not going far for the present, and as for the lady—it is only natural that I should admire her, since there are few faces that I have seen lately, that were quite as expressive. Introduce me, won't you?"

"Introduce who? Does Billy Button look like a man w'ot wor interducin' folks. You must do ther job up yerself; an' then you're standin' on yer own merits, an' can't be a-blamin' no one ef yer can't reach. Ruffle up to her, man. She'll treat yer white."

"Excuse me, but I want to ask first, who is the man behind the door?"

"Which?"

"I mean who is the gentleman who furnishes the capital for all this? I prefer knowing whose toes are in the way before I set my foot down. He might have something to say; and I am a stranger in the camp, don't you know?"

"You're 'way off, stranger. There's lots ov men, I'll allow, what would be willin' ter stake ther concern, with all ther coin it could git away with, goin' at a reasonable gait; but she puts up her own funds, an' there's no one ter grumble fur ef she ever goes dead broke."

"And the name of the charming young lady?"

"Frank."

"Frank what?"

"Jest Frank—though they sometimes call her ther gal at ther Antelope, when they're talkin' 'bout a place where yer kin git a game with a great big flyer, er no limit at all ef yer wants ter play fur all day, an' a big pile. Ruffle up, ole man, I seen her a-lookin' this way a bit ago, an' I know you're jest about her style."

"Thanks; but I think she has found some one now who will suit her style better. Perhaps, though, I will have to look for a front seat in the synagogue, after all. He bows like a bad man from 'way back. Who is he?"

But Billy Button was already gone. There was fun in front, and he had no more time to waste on a stranger.

CHAPTER VI.

RACK RUNNION GETS A SIGHT OF A FULL HAND.

WHEN Arden came things were lively, but all was decency and order. The introduction of a discordant element was easily to be noticed, and to Arden it seemed that every man in the room would or should be on his feet.

On the contrary no one paid the least attention to what was going on at the bar. Billy Button did not count because he was one of the unattached, and made his change of base without any apparent reference to anything. The fact was that he had been in a pretty fair line with Miss Frank and the man who leaned over the bar, talking in a rough and boisterous manner that seemed to call for the kind of rebuke the young lady sometimes administered when a mild caution had no effect. Billy might be drunk, but he was not so far gone that he could not look out for his personal safety.

"Pretty well drilled, she has them," muttered the sport. "They are not the kind to let such a performance go through unless it was according to orders. As a stranger perhaps I might be allowed to hold a hand. Looks like a tough customer, that fellow does, and I don't see why I should not have some fun. What the deuce is he saying?"

It was not the man but the woman who was talking, as Arden quietly edged his way up to the neighborhood of the two.

"Don't make a fool of yourself, Mr. Runnion, and don't try to make a fool of me. When the time arrives that I will allow myself to be a cat's-paw I will let you know. For the present, you know the rules of the house and that I carry them out regardless of who offends. Moderate your tones, say your say, and then pass on. You will not be cautioned twice."

To a certain extent the man she had called Runnion heeded the caution, since he lowered

the tone of his voice—perhaps insensibly. Still he was rough and threatening.

"Thar ain't no use ter try ther bluff game on me, an' you oughter know it. I come in hyar lookin' fur a man. Ef I find him that won't be no holdin' back, an' ef yer know what's good fur ther Antelope you won't be bluffin' Rack Runnion. Fur two cents I'd take yer one-hoss little spiel-shop, an' chuck it over inter ther kenyon. You hear me; an' you see me? An' ef you want ter call me, send yer heelers this hyar way. I'm jest in sich lovely humor ter-night thet woman er no woman I kin wade in gore."

"Come, come, Rack Runnion! It's not often that I let a man caper as far over the line as I have permitted you to do. Don't try to go a step further. I gave you a mild caution at the start, and you must have misunderstood me. After this it will be business, chuck up."

Miss Frank was undeniably angry, and the man was not so far gone with either passion or whisky that he could not see it. He knew, too, that there was a certain amount of fascination in his gaze, that was holding her more or less in check. How long that would last was uncertain, but meantime, the hand that rested on his hip was very near to the revolver that hung from his waist, and his fingers were twitching a trifle nervously, as though he was itching to clutch it.

"If you please, my friend," interrupted Arden, mildly, and at the same time laying a hand lightly but firmly on his shoulder.

"Don't occupy the whole length and breadth of the room. I am a stranger here, but I want to have a chance."

At the interruption both man and woman gave a start.

"After me are manners, little kid!" responded Rack, tossing the hand from his shoulder.

Then he turned and faced the sport, a broad smile taking the place of the frown on his face, as he saw who it was.

In fact, there was contrast enough between the two men to provoke a smile. Arden was not what might be called a small-sized man. He was well-built, and above the average medium in height. But Rack Runnion was Herculean in build, and his hand was on his revolver. In any kind of a contest he was apparently more than able to hold his own—as he had done with good men of every sort, times without number.

"But, man alive! you don't want the whole earth to spread in. I acknowledge that you need considerable of it; but give me room according to my size. If not"—and the sport's voice changed sharply—"I'll make it."

It was offering a premium for a difficulty, in the light of the late course of Rack Runnion; but the latter was one of those men whom a little gentle opposition from an unexpected source was wont to put in a good humor for the time being. If it blossomed into something fatal later on that was because the other lost his opportunity to make hay while the sun shone.

"Now you are a-shoutin'. W'y I am ez glad ter see a man ov yer size with ther sand ter talk that way ter Rack Runnion ez ef my claim war salted, an' I hed sold fur a million an' a-half. Room? In course you shell hev room—all ther room you kin ask fur. What'll you take ter drink? Set up his vanity, Miss Frank, an' charge it ter me."

"That sounds as though I were to drink alone—something I have hardly had a chance to get used to since I came to this wild and woolly country. Set them up for both of us, Miss Frank, and the survivor pays the bill."

By this time Miss Frank was entirely herself again, cold, calm and collected.

"Excuse me, gentlemen; but it seems to me that you are getting ready to quarrel. And Rack Runnion, it appears that you are trying to get in the game on this stranger that you have played more than once to my knowledge. I prefer not—in my house, at least. If you are really bent on a fracas, go out doors. If you start it here as sure as we know who made little fishes I will shoot you both. You have been looking away just long enough for me to take the drop, and you can wager all the coin that you have been rustling around with so freely that I don't lose it again. What is it to be—peace between yourselves, or war with me?"

"Why, miss, I don't think you could expect to see two more peaceable looking men than we are," said the sport mildly.

"We are getting to terms, and from the way things run you can expect to see us brothers before morning. I assure you, I would not have a row in the Antelope for a little fortune. My friend, here, can vouch for himself; and it don't take more than a single glance at my face to tell what I am. Set up the vial as suggested, and everything will be lovely."

The young lady turned to an assistant, who stood at the other end of the bar, with a face as immobile as though it was carved out of wood. She simply nodded, and at once the decanter was placed upon the bar.

From the time that the sport had placed his hand on Rack Runnion's shoulder the latter individual had seemed to have the advantage in every way, and just now Arden looked to be more careless than ever. He pushed the decanter along until it faced the other, and waited

for him to pour out what proved to be a generous share of its contents without the least appearance of suspicion. Then he filled his own tumbler, and held it carelessly up to the light, a smile on his lips as he exclaimed:

"Here's to better acquaintance!"

"An' thar ye hev it!" chuckled a voice almost at his elbow, though in so low a tone that the sport could scarcely have heard it if he had been listening.

And if Billy Button was a little previous it was no fault of his judgment in regard to Runnion's intentions. That worthy tossed down his liquor at a gulp, and then, wheeling, struck a straight blow at the smiling face at his side. Really, he did not hit as hard as he knew how, because it was more for the fun of thinking how the sport would be surprised when he measured his length on the floor, than on account of anger, that he hit out. As one of his love-taps would almost level an elephant it was just as well that the man who was to be the victim had his wits about him.

Without warning or exclamation the sport's knees let down a link or two, and the blow went grazing over the top of his head.

The force of the blow sent Runnion well forward, and for an instant he was off of his guard. That was enough for the All-around Sport. Without attempting a return, which he could have got in well enough, he threw his arms around the waist of the giant, taking a fair underhold; gave him a hug and a wrench that seemed to be crushing every bone in the bully's back; and then, tossing him partly over his hip, he ran out through the open door, and with a fling sent him far out into the street.

"Now, then, my lively pard, pistols are trumps, and if you want to keep in with the game you will have to show a great, big handful."

CHAPTER VII.

A MAIDEN MISSING.

THE transfer from inside to outside was made so quickly that the fair proprietor had no time to object, unless she did it in a way that was almost too emphatic to suit the case. Perhaps if the positions of the two men had been reversed she might have felt justified in trying a shot with the pistol that she half raised, and then lowered again.

Of course, the performance was a little more than could pass unnoticed by the frequenters of the house, and drilled as they were to attend to their own business and let that of other people alone, a movement followed. A procession started for the door. It was a very orderly one, but still it was a procession, and Frank watched it file out without a word of hindrance. If the stranger chose to put himself out of the range of her protection, he must look out for himself. Whether he had come into the game on her account was more than she could decide, and for the present the question did not trouble her.

When the crowd came cautiously out they found that the stranger had acted with remarkable consideration, since he had moved along the porch until he was no longer in line with the door, and egress for the rest was comparatively safe. Of course, it might have been that he did not want to give the chance to be taken directly in the rear, but the effect was the same. He had his eyes fixed on Runnion, and a revolver in his hand, while the way he uttered the words given at the close of the preceding chapter showed that he was in deadly earnest.

The way in which he had been handled somewhat confused Rack Runnion. His hands went to his hips mechanically, and it took the sharp voice of Edgar Arden, and a warning cry from some of his acquaintances in the crowd that was swarming out, to convince him that the drop was on him.

"Hold on!" he shouted. "That ain't fun, that's business."

"Of course it is—with a large B. I have had my fun, and if you lost your chance you're the one to weep over it. You move a finger and I'll drill you. I have had a sample of the way you get in your work, or try to, and don't intend to leave any openings, as long as I know myself!"

"But say, ain't you going to give me ary show at all?" asked the Hercules, a wily look coming into his eyes. "You ain't goin' ter shoot a man down in cold blood? W'y, ther boys would rise right at yer. Let up ef yer know w'ot's good fur yer. Take a new deck, an' start fresh."

"Any kind of a deck you call for so you don't deal before I cut. I'll give you the chance of the shuffle, and if you can stock them while I am looking on I won't grumble. What is it going to be? I am waiting on you."

"Ef ye'r a man come down here and show what you can do. Because you took me off my guard when I wasn't lookin', it's no sign you're a better man than I be. Hyar's what can take keer ov Rack Runnion's head ary day in the week."

Rack raised up his right arm, and patted the bulging muscles in a significant way. He was willing to trust to nature's weapons in spite of his recent overthrow.

"My friend, I have an idea that you don't play fair. That being the case, I prefer to count the deck between deals. If you want to try what there is in muscle and brain, please shuck

yourself of your sixes, and then I won't have to shoot when you begin to reach for them. You haven't temper enough to fight for a sour apple."

"Temper ernuf ter do you," retorted Rack, evidently somewhat easier in mind; and he dropped his belt by a dexterous touch, which did not bring his hands near to his revolvers.

"Pick 'em up, Jack," he added, nodding to a friend whose face he could see in the swarm on the porch. "When this hyar frolic are over you kin give 'em to ther best man. An' I don't guess ther stranger'll have much use fur 'em about that time."

"All right! It's a pity if a man can't have an opinion once in a while. Where's Billy Button? I want him to hold mine."

"Hyar he be, ther on'y 'riginal Billy, an' ez squar' a man ter tie to ez ever drew breath. With pleasure."

Billy took off his hat with a drunken gravity that was ridiculous, made a profound bow, and then relieved Arden of his coat and weapons with hands that were unsteady, but not altogether unused to handling such things.

Then the sport stepped down from the porch, and advanced toward Rack Runnion, who threw himself into something like a pugilistic position and awaited his coming.

"Shake, eh?" he asked, holding out his hand. "That's about what they allers do, ter show they ain't bearin' no malice."

"Not this time; some other time. Ready?"

"Ready it are, an' hyar goes fur yer meetin'-house."

Without more ado the two slowly sidled into reaching distance, and stood eying each other sharply. The contrast between the two individuals was now if anything stronger than ever. In addition, Runnion had an attitude that showed him to be not altogether devoid of pugilistic knowledge. The betting began at once, and the odds were two to one on Rack, in spite of the fact that by this time the stranger had been recognized as one of the two men who had got the better of Judge Burden.

Eyesight has a convincing way about it; and any one looking at these two men for the first time would say that Runnion had both the size and strength to crush his adversary in the first round.

Besides that he did not rush forward too confidently to beat down his man, as fellows of his stamp are apt to do. He sparred warily, as if watching for an opening, his hands held low down, thoroughly protecting his body, while he held his head well back out of reach. Between the moonlight and the lamplight that was streaming out from the front of the Antelope, there was sufficient illumination for all practical purposes. If the stranger was as good as he looked, it was not likely that the fight would be finished in a hurry, unless one or the other of them got in a chance knock-down blow.

"How's that, little one?" chuckled Rack, his arm shooting out with a rapidity that was really astonishing.

There was a resounding spat as he spoke, but Arden did not stagger back, as was expected. Runnion had struck open-handed, and if the connection had been made the slap would have been hard enough to level almost any man, but the sport had thrown up the palm of his right hand and caught the blow, hand to hand. Then he threw in a return of the same kind with his left, which landed squarely on Runnion's ear.

Rack reeled a little, and shook his head. He could stand a thousand thumps like that, so far as any impression they would make on his head went, but it was not very encouraging to have his good intentions thwarted and then returned in kind. He sprang back and looked savagely at his man, trying to see where the weak spot would be in his armor.

The sport was smiling sweetly, as though he had no weak spots and did not intend to have. At the same time Runnion had sobered up most thoroughly, and was not likely to throw away any chances.

After a trifle of long-range sparring the two got together again, and once, twice, thrice the arm of the heavy-weight shot out, every blow aimed at the point of Edgar Arden's nose. If any one of them had landed it would have been apt to have smashed that rather handsome feature of the sport's face into a jelly.

But they never got there. From side to side his head moved easily, but quickly, and his right arm rolled up in a lazy but perfect guard. Several times he made a double feint, and each time it seemed like a certain thing that the second blow could have been sent home. It began to look as though the only important question was, how hard the sport could hit. If in proportion to his stopping abilities Rack would not have a walk-over, at any rate. The champion of Glory Flat would have met a hard customer to handle, even if he did not lose his laurels.

Billy Button, the sport's bottle-holder, watched the fun with a sage smile that might have belonged to experience, but which looked wonderfully like the effects of bad whisky. At the feints which were not followed up he shook his head in disapproval.

"S'ranger, yer loosin' vallyble time, ef yer on'y knowed it. Better wipe 'im all up afore

ther crowd gits ter walkin' over yer with the'r boots. This kind ov thing can't last long. It's too heavenly. Go fur him quick afore he makes yer tired."

And then Runnion showed what he had been angling for, all along. He had been making a great show with his fists, but it was a bout at wrestling that he actually wanted. He felt that he had lost prestige through the way he had been handled, and desired to get his enemy in the same box that he had been in, and show that it was in him to handle the other man just as handily as he himself had been. He drew Arden on to lead through a well-simulated bit of carelessness; and then rushed in for a close. For a moment his arms were seen twining around the body of the sport in a bear-like hug, and he uttered a shout of triumph, as his fingers almost touched each other behind Arden's back, in the under hold.

"Sold again!" laughed the sport, an instant later, as he changed his arms in some mysterious way, that Runnion never could rightly understand, his face showing untroubled over Rack's shoulder, while his locked hands dug deeply into the small of that unfortunate's back.

"You must arise very early in the morning if you want to get ahead of an all-around sport; and then the chances are that you will find he has got there first. I think you have all that you want."

For the second time he crushed the man in that more than vise-like gripe—but the first was nothing to be compared to this. Then it was simply to get the upper hand sufficiently to drag him out of the Antelope; but this time it was to leave him there. The fists dug deeper and deeper, until it seemed to Rack Runnion that his back must be crushed; and at the same time the pressure from in front was rendering his breathing more and more laborious. He thought no longer of any offensive movement. He was actually losing his nerve, and only wished to escape.

That brought him around to where the sport wanted him. At the right moment he gave a harder hug than ever, and then deftly dropped his hand, catching Rack by the thigh. With a half swing and half lift he fairly raised the big man from the ground, and at the same time stooping, threw him back over his head. Then he turned around to Billy Button.

"Some things, you see, can be done as well as others. Give me my clothes."

"Hoeray, stranger! give me yer hand fur ninety days! Didn't I told yer so? Thar's nothin' like hev'in' ther right man in yer' corner. You an' me—oh, we could scoop a town."

"Like as not, old man, like as not; but meantime let me whisper in the tip of your pictureful ear, if you are looking for a man in this beautiful burg, the chances are about nine to one that he is the fellow. And it's dead sure that you had better take him while you can get him. Sabbe? I don't think I will speak twice."

Billy gave a drunken stare, and then a wink that was meant to be knowing.

"I dunno ez I'm wantin' a man jest ez bad ez I mout' ef I war a mighty chief, an' ef I war, I wouldn't hev no biz with Rack. He's your game. Oh, it war just elegant, an' that's a fact. Le'ss have a drink on that. Ther crowd's comin', an' yer want ter set 'em up on it."

So far the sport certainly could not complain of not having a fair field, even if he got no favor. He turned to meet the men who were trooping down from the porch, now that the fun was over. They were asking whether Runnion's neck was broken; some were ready to congratulate the sport on his easy victory; while others were looking at him in a way that meant they would be glad to serve him out as effectually if they only had the chance. Altogether, it was rather a mixed position for a stranger.

"Don't be excited, about your friend," he said quietly. "His neck is not broken at all, and his other bones are all solid. He has got nothing but a lesson that he needed badly enough. It will take him twenty minutes to come to his senses, and about two days to be as good as new. Meantime, what are you all going to take? As Billy hasn't run away with my coat I'll put it on and then lead the procession. I think you all look dry."

He drew on his upper garment deliberately, and just as it settled into place a man came rushing breathlessly through the crowd, and throwing his arms around his neck whispered into his ears:

"Holy Abraham! It ish life or death. Mine daughter is stole away. It vos dot rascally Captain Flash vot done it, an' he vill murder her ven he vindts oudt dot I vill not a cent pay ven he dinks he gits a great deal. Come mid me along, quick."

CHAPTER VIII.

BILLY BUTTON SHOWS HIS CARDS.

THERE was a depth of despair about the Jew that might have drawn sympathy from a stone; but somehow he was unfortunate in his spectators. Those who were near did not catch his words, and what they saw on the surface was irresistibly ludicrous. He had in very pronounced shape the peculiar features of his race, and if he had been a carefully gotten-up actor he could not have dressed the part to greater

perfection. To see him with his arms around the neck of the sport, pouring his sorrows into his ear was as good as a show. Every man who could note the expression of his face set up a shout.

Saphireinstein never heard them. He was looking eagerly into the face of the sport, and waiting to hear his answer, as if, perhaps, there was a crumb of comfort to be gained from it.

Arden simply shrugged his shoulders, and removed the man's arms from his neck, without a sign of either annoyance or amusement.

"Vill you come vid me doo quick? I dells you, id vos life or death."

"Excuse me, my friend. You have come to the wrong man. The other sport is the fellow for your money just now. You seem to be all right up to the present time, and I was not aware when I started that there was any one else on the waybill. When you get in hock it will be time enough for me to worry. We can look after the young lady as we come back, but at present, when I am not attending to my duties with you, I am pursuing my recreations elsewhere. I am about leading the crowd up to drink. Better go along and drown your sorrows in the flowing bowl. You won't, eh? Well, so long. Perhaps I can see you later."

"But the odder sport I can not see, an' v'ile I am vaitin', v'ot vill happen?"

"That's all right, then. You can count on his being on the trail. Go home and to bed. If everything is not all straight in the morning, you can talk it over with me. For the present I am otherwise engaged."

The Jew eyed his man in despair. There did not seem to be the least bit of use appealing to him; and prudential reasons caused him to refrain from making an appeal to the crowd for aid. He saw the sport walk off, with nearly every one there in his following, and then, wringing his hands, started in the direction of the Happy Hope.

He had not gone very far before he was aware that some one was following him. With a faint hope that it might be Edgar Arden, he turned. He was too much concerned to have the fear for himself that at another time he might have shown.

The shambling figure in his rear did not look much like the sport.

"It's all right, old man. I heard what you said to that party you just left, and I want to speak a word or two with you. Go on without showing I had anything to say to you, and I will join you at the Happy Hope. You may make a heap of danger for both of us if you give me away."

Saphireinstein, even in his present perturbed condition, could mark the contrast between the looks and the talk of the man—who was none other than Billy Button. He gave no answer. The fellow looked like a dead beat; but he talked like an entirely different sort of person, and Moses had no desire to stand still.

The bumper—if bumper he was—dropped behind again in a way so natural that all suspicion would be dissolved if any one was watching him.

Nevertheless, he so arranged his pace that he came to the porch almost as soon as Saphireinstein did, and found the latter waiting for him.

"I don't want to waste any time with you, but I want to give you a warning that you seem to be in need of. Of course you must know that if the roughs and robbers of the border are aware of what your journey means, and that you are carrying on your person a fortune in diamonds, they will be after you, hot-footed. Well, they do know it. After your late experience with Captain Flash and his gang you can hardly fail to suspect that much. You are in great danger, and it will take hard work to get you out of this place alive, and with your treasure. I can help you, though, if you will trust me."

"Holy Abraham! An' v'y should I trust you? It vos best to trust nopeddy. V'ot does you know apout mine own affairs?"

"I know what Don Silvio knows, and that is enough to cover the whole ground. The road-agents know it; I know it; the Mexican officials know it; and, worst of all, the men you are trusting know it."

"You dakes me for one pig fool, when I vos trousting nopeddy."

Saphireinstein was evidently a German Jew, whose command of the English language had not improved a particle since his second week over.

"You seem to be trusting these men who came with you more or less; and very bad leather they are for any one to trust. Perhaps if you knew who the man you just parted from really was, you would not think of being in his company for another moment. He may save you from all the rest, but it will be to gobble you for himself at last."

"Maype you dinks I dosh not know my man? V'ot you dakes me for?"

"Very well, if warning is thrown away on you I will have to let events open your eyes. Of course the warning I have given you is confidential. I am looking for the proofs that will convince the rest of the world as thoroughly as I am convinced. I am on the eve of obtaining

them; and after that you will be in no danger, so far as he is concerned."

"Vich man vos dose?" asked Moses, with a little more of curiosity than he had yet shown.

"You dells me the whole truth now, or I askk him v'ot it vos you meant."

"If you cannot understand the plain talk I have been pumping into you, gentle hints would be altogether thrown away. I'll give you one more pointer, and then you can go your own way. Captain Flash is still after you, and just beginning to be dangerous. Now, what is this that you have been telling to the man I saw you speaking to a bit ago? You seemed strangely excited. I did not catch exactly what you were telling him; but I judged that you were appealing to him for certain aid which he refused to give."

"Mine chraycious! I forgit dot altogedder. It makes no tifference. Id vos all right, no doubt. You vos not joost so smart as you dinks you vos, an' I dells not mine pizziness to nopoddy. Goot-night."

And Moses, who had apparently recovered, either his self-possession or his peace of mind, turned away and hurried off to find whether there was any news in regard to Rebecca.

"Well, of all blank idiots that ever I did see, he takes the cake," muttered the man who had been posing as Billy Button.

"Somebody will pick him up; that is sure as fate. If I wasn't born honest, and by profession a detective, I believe I would go for him myself. Fifty thousand dollars at the least is a stake worth playing for, even in this land of big money. Of course, if I can freeze onto Captain Flash, that will be a good grist in my mill; but it won't protect the Jew from the next man, and he may be a heap sight worse. Wonder what my man meant by his remarks over that giant. It looks as tho' he knew something of my business here, and was foolhardy enough to give me a warning that was meant for a threat. I suppose I had better go back to the Antelope and keep my eye on him, though of course he will soon gravitate to his headquarters at the Happy Hope. It was a shrewd dodge to throw me off; but he will stick closer to Moses than a chestnut burr. That's my best hold to take him."

This was the way that the man thought. The way he looked was something altogether different. He was once more the shambling, half-drunken bummer when he slouched into the saloon, and sidled up to the sport, without saying a word.

During his absence there was time enough for a great deal to happen, and he found that Arden had been making the most of it.

Rack Runnion had been brought to his senses after considerable labor over him by his friends, and had gone off without a word. This was scarcely regretted as there had been some fears that he would not be satisfied, but would try another hitch at the sport, after he had somewhat recovered. In his absence the successful man was a hero, and there was no trouble in making the acquaintance of every man in the room. If Rack had any friends in the crowd that saw the fight they had departed with their champion. When the approach to the bar had been made, and every one mollified at the expense of the sport, Tite Thompson came gliding into the room. Before he had got half-way from the door he was in possession of the facts in the case, and advanced with more than his usual alacrity.

"Good boy!" he said, nodding cheerfully.

"I don't know but what it was the part of wisdom, after all, to take the bull by the horns, instead of waiting for him to take you. If you ever do anything with the pasteboards you would have found him a mighty chief. He was on a drift to-night, which made him a little ugly, or there would have been no trouble—at least until after the little game he would undoubtedly have raked you into. I used to consider that I was about the best of the short card proficient of the Flat; but when Rack came into the game I found myself left so often that I began to sing small when he was about. How is it? Am I touching on your vanity?"

The sport laughed genially.

"Gentlemen in my business can't afford to have any vanity; it's all pure business. And I swear, I would sooner have had a mild little conversation over a deck, than to have gone to all that trouble, without a cent's worth of profit in it, and not more than half fun, either. Of course, I may be mistaken; but I am willing to risk money any day that I can hold over Mister Runnion at any game ever invented. I don't suppose that either of us is bluffing."

The frank answer could admit of but one construction. The sport accepted the challenge; and if Thompson had come in for business he had the chance to engage in it. They got to work, at once. When Billy Button arrived he found the two at one of the small tables, thick in a quiet game of draw, with about a dozen interested spectators, and the fair Frank watching them from a distance with troubled eyes.

As far as the faces of the men told any story Billy could have learned nothing. Each was imperturbable. But from the remarks that were let fall by the outsiders it seemed that the

game was running about even so far with Tite for winner as first choice. As Billy drew nearer, Arden looked up, and fixed him with his keen eye.

"It's all right, sport," said Billy, a little more steadily than he had been talking.

"I know when I hev enough—an' I kin be filled up, now an' then. I jest slid off tell ther big drink war over, an' then come ag'in, ter see fair play. I kin 'joy it better, later on. I hed a walk, an' now I'm good fur all night. When I ketch on with a real gent, an' a show-up fur an all-night bender, I want ter be fit fur it. Go fur him pard, an' we'll paint ther town real red, later on."

"Don't apologize. I swear I hadn't missed you; and I ain't very glad to see you now. Dry up; be quiet; and let the game go on."

Thompson had been dealing, and now the sport carefully raised his cards.

From the outset both men acted confidently. After a little they began to raise the pot in a way that looked reckless in the extreme. One after the other talked as though he had no intention of quitting.

"No use to waste time," remarked Thompson, at length, when the All-around Sport had raised him another hundred.

"Suppose you tell us just what you are willing to risk on your hand and I'll raise you enough to get us out of the woods. Nothing like having a game quick and lively; and I stand to back my cards with all I am worth."

"Probably. I believe they call this game bluff sometimes," said Arden dryly, and once more looking over his cards. "I ain't exactly ready to have you quit, so I don't care about naming my big figures. Guess after all we are doing well enough with our little hundred dollar raises. Speak up, loud and hearty. What are you willing to do? The game is waiting."

Mr. Thompson may have been flattered to hear his proposal taken as a bluff, but he learned little from it, even if the answer seemed to indicate that the sport had a shadow of distrust of his hand. He took another glance at his own cards, and then suddenly made up his mind.

"Right you are, and there's a lead for you, that may make things move faster. A thousand better—and there's more behind it if you want to carry the fun along a little further."

"Thousands go, if that's about the height of your limit; though I would sooner have it up in the tens of thousands. I am going to stay right with you, all the time, as long as the buckskin holds out."

"And what do you think I will be doing? There's not more up on the board than I am used to flipping for at a crack, on a rainy day. One better again."

"Call you. Perhaps you are bluffing; and perhaps it's straight goods. Anyhow, when we open up we will know more about your style of playing draw. There is your thousand covered. What have you got?"

Tite Thompson carefully counted out the money, and placed it on the board, and the All-around Sport was spreading out the cards in his hand, preparatory to throwing them down on the board, when the interruption came.

CHAPTER IX.

WHERE REBECCA WENT.

THE young lady was tired with a long ride, and felt more like resting than she had ever done before in her life. She had a little lunch in her sachel, so that she did not have to go altogether supperless to bed, even if she did refuse to join her fellow-travelers at the supper table. She threw herself down on the bed that occupied the greater part of the small room, and began to nibble at a biscuit while she thought over the late occurrence at the door of the hotel.

It was no use to deny the fact. The Judge was no stranger to her—or, at least, there had been a time when he was not. She knew as much of him as did the Flat, and perhaps more. How he came to be here she did not stop to consider; but since they had met she felt inclined to take his words at more than their face value, even; and to believe that there was trouble in store for her from this man who had once professed to be her lover.

There was enough in this to keep her wide awake if she had not been more tired, even, than she knew. She had no idea of so much as closing her eyes, and she went to sleep with a fragment of biscuit between her teeth.

She slept soundly for an hour, with nothing to interrupt. Then an opening appeared in the partition—an opening which resembled a small door, which had been hidden by the paper with which the wall was covered. Everything was of the rudest or the flimsiest construction, and it would be more than a wonder if any one could or would suspect there was such a means of ingress, or egress.

A man appeared at the opening. He was stooping low, so that he could peer into the room, and his face was covered with a scarf of black lace which acted as an effectual mask.

The regular breathing from the bed told him that the occupant of the room was deep in slumber, and the low-burning lamp on the rough stand at the head of the bed showed him

that the young lady had not yet retired, but had fallen asleep without disrobing.

After that he did not hesitate, but, stooping lower, he advanced through the aperture, and stood by the side of the bed. In his hands he held a towel and a sponge. With a quick motion he pressed both over the nose and mouth of the sleeper, holding them in place with the one hand, while with the other he gathered her two wrists, and held her helpless.

There was a struggle, a smothered groan from under the towel, and then the girl was silent and motionless. The drug had taken quick effect, and she was altogether powerless.

Still leaving the towel in place the man advanced to the door, and examined the fastenings. He gave a little nod of approbation when he saw that the bolt was shot into its socket; and then turned back toward the opening.

"All right!" he whispered, his voice so thoroughly disguised that even Tite Thompson would not have discovered Judge Burden was the speaker.

"She's sound asleep, and won't be apt to wake again till somebody helps her along. One of you come in, and the other keep watch to see that nobody comes prying around till after the job is over."

Another man came through the opening. He was disguised with the same kind of a mask as the first; and both of them wore suits of brown over-all, that could be duplicated a hundred times in the camp.

"There's her grip; go through that, first of all. Like as not she carries them there. If she does she did not take time to hide them anywhere else. She fell asleep as soon as she touched the bed. She didn't mean it, either. You can see that by looking at her. If they are there it will make the thing just too easy."

The fellow, thus advised, caught up the sachel, and bending toward the light, wrenched it open, and hastily ran through its contents.

A smothered exclamation of disgust escaped him as he found nothing there save the traveling paraphernalia of a young lady who was reasonably well used to purple and fine linen.

"Nothin' hyer," was his low, whispered comment. "There's a slue ov wimmin fixin's, more than I know ther name ov, but no show fur any diamonds. Say, ther best plan are ter take ther gal, baggidge, an' every thing we kin find in ther room. Ef we don't strike the bonanzer jest so soon ther old man'll be glad ernuf ter fork over, sooner than see her stickin' in our hands. What yer say?"

The other gave something like a chuckle.

"That was part of the programme, as I laid it out. The girl is a prize in herself; at least, I would be willing to take her for my share of the spoils. If no one else will ante up I will see that you draw big pay fer this night's work. I laid it all out before I started on the trip."

"There's noshin' ther matter with Ben's doby, an' ther trap under ther bunk; eh?"

"Guessed it first time. And have Mag down to take care of her until we see what she is worth."

While this conversation was going on the two men were not at all idle.

It was plain enough that they believed that Saphirestein had intrusted his diamonds to his daughter, for safe keeping on the journey. Such a move would be a natural one for a man who was somewhat timid.

But though they searched the room thoroughly not a sign did they find of the jewels; and time was too precious to linger longer if they intended to carry out the proposed abduction.

"It is no use. We take her baggage; but there is really nothing here worth taking save the girl."

"What you sez is bound ter go. Won't ther be some eyes wide open 'round hyer in ther mornin'? Ef I hed time blessed ef I wouldn't clean out ther place ter the lamp an' cracker-box. I'd give 'em s'uthin' ter talk about. Hurry up, while ye'r in the humor, an' it'll go twice as easy."

Of course it was a daring thing that they attempted, but they were men who were used to doing daring things in the line of their business, and luck had been steadily with them, as far as having a clear field went. The side of the house on which the bedroom was located lay in the shadow. Once out of that a few paces they would have to take in the moonlight; but after that they could travel quite a distance without much danger of being observed. So long as the girl remained unconscious there was but little more danger in her abduction than in taking their own departure. A few more words of instruction and then the man who seemed to be the recognized leader carefully gathered up the girl on his arm.

The young lady was by no means what would be called a light-weight, considering her sex, but the man handled her with the same care and ease that he would have bestowed upon a sleeping infant. He handed her out carefully to the third of the party; then the two made a final search of the chamber, gathered up everything that might be worth the taking, and vanished through the dumb door.

In the next room no halt was made. An open

window showed a means of egress, and through that they went out of the Happy Hope.

Slowly they glided along, keeping well in the shade of the hotel. When they reached the belt of light which separated them from the next house a temporary halt was made. The girl was transferred from the arm of the man who had been carrying her to that of the leader. In doing so the fellow left his elbow so exposed that the moonlight had a chance to fall fairly on it. Instantly came the crack of a revolver from the house. A man had fired from the open window they had lately left, and then, without waiting to see the result of his shot, had sprung out and darted away in pursuit. The man was Wheeler Wilson, but he came on the carpet a trifle late. A couple of moments sooner and he would have entered the room in time to fall directly upon the abductors.

His shot was not wasted. He knew that, though it could not bring the man down, it went crashing through the elbow that was exposed, causing the fellow to shoot forward with an involuntary howl, that no doubt he would have strangled if he could.

The report of the pistol alarmed but one man. Saphirenstein heard it, and lay still for a moment, trying to make up his mind whether it was best for him to investigate as to its meaning. By the time he was out of his own and trying the door of the other room, all was quiet within. In that way it was some time before he found that both his daughter and Wheeler Wilson were missing. In doubt as to what was best next to do, he finally went off in search of Edgar Arden, with the result already detailed.

The shot had its good results, however, so far as Wilson was concerned. It hampered the three men somewhat, and so, when he reached the corner of the house, although there was no one in sight he could faintly hear the sounds of retreating footsteps, and followed them without hesitation.

Perhaps it was as well that it was no lighter. When he had gone a little further he would have seen a clearly marked trail of blood, that led off from the line he was following, and it might have confused him. As it was he made no mistake, but kept on the line as true as though he was running by scent.

For a time he was gaining, slowly but surely, and he began to think that the fellows in front might keep on in this way until he overhauled them. The chase led right out of town, and before long he could actually see two figures ahead. He smiled grimly when he noted that one man had dropped out, and that the other two were moving slowly, hampered as they were with the body they carried between them. He was reasonably sure of his aim in almost any sort of a light, and at almost any sort of a distance; but he was not yet in pistol-range, and hesitated to fire lest he might harm the burden. A little twist, or an unlucky stumble, would throw the girl within range, no matter how careful might be his aim. There was nothing to do but to hasten on and try and close up the gap. So far it did not seem as though his presence was noticed.

He would sooner have seen them halt to fight it out than what came next. They halted, but not to turn on him. Their retreat had not been without an aim. A horseman met them, leading by the bridles several steeds. After that the chase, for the present, would have seemed hopeless to any one less doggedly persevering than the All-around Sport, but he kept on all the same, gaining a little more ground, in that moment of hesitation on the part of the fugitives.

CHAPTER X.

MR. WILSON IS ON HAND.

THE man who met the fugitives was masked in the same way as the others, and his clothing was of the roughest sort. His profane exclamation of disgust was followed by an expression or two of surprise, and a sharp reproof. This was something that so far as he knew had not been provided for on the programme, and it was easy to see that he was not pleased with the variation.

A few words of explanation seemed to somewhat reconcile him to the appearance of the prisoner, and when the rest had settled themselves in the saddle he led the way at a pace that bid fair to soon drop Wheeler Wilson far behind.

"Now or never," muttered the sport, as he gave a hitch to his waistband, and bent doggedly to the work before him, running strong and swiftly, but not acting as though he intended to wind himself by a burst of speed that could not long be kept up. A faint cry, floating back to him told that the young lady had recovered consciousness, and was awake to the danger of her position.

The little party was not yet beyond the range of his vision, and he saw, or thought he saw, that the captive gave a violent struggle, and he believed, at first, that she had wrenched herself from the grasp of the man who held her, and was about to throw herself to the ground.

Then it seemed as though she had not only succeeded in doing that, but that the three men had fallen with her. It was only at a second

glance he made out that horses and riders were disappearing. While he looked they apparently sunk into the ground.

What had really happened?

Of course there had been a moment of awakened consciousness when the chloroform was first applied, but after that Miss Saphirenstein knew nothing more until she found herself in the open air, on the back of a horse, and clasped in the arms of a man. How she got there she could not even guess, or what fate was in store for her. A glance at her captors told her that they were all masked; and that was enough to show that they were not men to whose honesty and fair dealing she could trust.

As the man who carried her shifted his hold a little it brought her face to the front, and she could catch a glimpse of what lay ahead of them. She saw hills at some little distance; and then, right in front, was opening a chasm, into which horses and riders were dashing.

At that she was suddenly galvanized into apparent life. She uttered the cry that was heard by the sport, and attempted to throw herself from the arms of the man who was holding her.

The movement was so sudden and unexpected that it was only too successful. Just as the horses, who seemed well used to the way, were turning swiftly to descend a natural pathway down the steep side of the barranca, she went head foremost down into the chasm.

It was a narrow thing that the man and horse did not go over with her, from the involuntary movement of the man, as he felt Rebecca leaving his arms. The path was none too wide, and the footing was anything but secure. The horse felt the shock, and stumbled slightly.

There was a low exclamation of horror from the three, and their flight was checked as soon as possible. Then, when they had reined in, they all gazed blankly down into the blackness below, from which there came up no sound.

"Dead, fur duckits!" exclaimed one, as he turned his ear to catch the slightest noise. "It's two hundred feet in a plumb line, an' not a break ther hull distance. We kin take our shovels when we go down in the mornin' ter see ef she kerried ary plunder. I wouldn't reesk my neck goin' down thar ter-night fur all ther boodle you pards thinks she kerried."

"Maybe yes, and maybe no to that," answered the leader, who had recovered from the first shock, and was bending over, trying to pierce through the gloom below.

"I don't hanker after a climb myself, and until I am sure that the girl is not dead I won't take it; but I would risk my neck a little sooner than know that she was there suffering and alone. We might get around to it, by going on down, and then turning back."

"An' git caught up too nice ef ther galoot ez busted Burt's arm hez got a crowd an' follered on out. Like ez not he'll come prowlin' along soon, an' ef we can't plug him we want ter skip. Letter lay thar. I'll bet they won't find her afore mornin', an' by that time we kin hev come back fur her safe ernuf. Jest now my name's Walker, an' I'm on ther go."

"There's something in that. We ought to have some plunder in the dunnage, if not the articles we are after. We had better skip out a little further, till we can see if there is any one on the trail. If one man comes we can settle him; if a dozen we can skip. Forward!"

They went on down the rocky path just as the sport came within bearing distance, and halted at the edge of the plain.

He listened to the footsteps of the horses as they clanked slowly down the rocky path, in doubt whether it was best to follow them or no.

"Sounds as though they had gone on, bag and baggage; but it takes a big twist of the wrist to beat my eyesight. If she went over there, and it is as deep as it looks, she is dead enough—and I will swear that I saw her go. It is no use to chase the men on horseback. If they can find a corral near by I can too; and if they keep on I can't reach them till they stop. I'll stay here and look around."

He was already out of breath with his sharp run, and the prospect of a further chase could not be agreeable, even if the odds were not against him. To do the sport justice, he never thought of the latter point; but he did think that it would be more dangerous to the young lady than to him if he overtook the three men in the darkness and they became aware of his presence. It is not in human nature to be shot at without shooting back, and there was no telling where a chance bullet might land. The worst of it was that he saw no way to pursue his investigations for the present. In the darkness he was as likely to bring destruction upon himself as aid to Rebecca, if he undertook to close in on the abductors, for a hand-to-hand struggle.

Still, it was possible that he might learn something by a little cautious investigation. He bent forward, and softly called:

"Miss Saphirenstein!"

He listened, without any hope of hearing an answer. To his astonishment it came.

"Is that you, Mr. Wilson?"

"Of course it is," he answered, promptly. "Don't waste time in words. Let me help you if you need it. Where are you?"

"Not very far off, if I can judge by the sound of your voice; and in no immediate danger. But it is only a lucky chance that I am still alive. I judge that I have slid down upon a narrow shelf, that the villains knew nothing of. I am almost afraid to try to find out what it is like for fear of losing my head; but for the present the footing seems secure. Reach down your hand, and see if I can touch it. I half believe that I can."

"Good. Keep your head cool, and you will be out of that in no time. The ruffians may come back, and if they do I will try my best to make things pleasant for them. I can do it, now that you are no longer in their hands."

He leaned over as far as he dared, and swept down through the darkness with his fingers, but failed to meet the hand that Rebecca thrust upward.

"It seems to me that I can almost feel your hand—but I cannot reach it yet. Dare you risk bending a little further?"

"No good in that. If you once got hold of my hand you would tumble us both over the brink. It won't do to trust to luck too often. Hold on a moment!"

Rapidly he divested himself of his coat.

"Here's something to steady yourself with. If you can reach it, and think you can hold on, I will have you out in a jiffy. How is it?"

It was scarcely worth while to ask her the question. He felt her grasp on the coat, and he knew that she was a young lady of nerve.

"Now then, we don't want any failures. It will be pretty hard work to pull you out, but if you can't climb I will have to do it. I am thinking that I had better try it, anyhow. I hear them coming back, and would just as soon not have a racket if it can be avoided. Perhaps I can catch on to some of the fellows all the easier in the morning."

"Thanks! But I can climb. Hold hard; I am coming!"

She spoke positively, and as the sport braced himself he felt her weight on the garment. Then, hand over hand, she slowly made her way upward, until he could catch her shoulders, as they appeared over the edge of the chasm, and draw her up, and away from danger.

Then she did weaken for a moment, and quivering from the reaction, rested motionless in his arms until she could recover the strength that came to her perhaps too quickly for the sport.

"Let us go, now," she said after the brief rest, and without a shade of trepidation in her tone. "We cannot be so far from the town, and perhaps we can get back without any one but ourselves and these outlaws being the wiser."

CHAPTER XI.

A DROP ON EVERYBODY.

THE interruption to the game came from the fair Frank, who stood behind the bar, and who had been watching the proceedings in an unobtrusive way that took in every move.

"Excuse me, Mr. Thompson, but you have a bradawl, a piece of a watch spring, together with three cards, under your side of the table, and your pard is standing behind the door with a shot-gun, ready to make a scatterment when the fun begins. This is my house, and I don't propose to have any such conduct as those in it. You can step down and out, or you can call for a count of the cards if you think that would prolong the agony sufficiently to make it an object. Talk very quick, because I am not in the habit of waiting long when I once decide that I ought to go on the war-path. How is it?"

If some one had thrown in a bomb with the fuse lighted it would not have startled the house more. In the quiet that generally reigned at the Antelope, every word was distinctly audible as it dropped from the lips of the young lady. The threat of what she herself proposed was enough of itself to make every man there—unless it was the All-around Sport—a little anxious over what might come next; and the mention of the man with a shot-gun, behind the door, added to the interest of the conversation. Who was he; and how soon did he propose to shoot? That and the idea every one had that he specially, was in the way, produced a sensation that could not help but make itself heard. The sport alone remained as calm and smiling as ever. His eyes never left the face of Mr. Thompson, and he quietly laid his hand down face uppermost, as he called it by name.

"A flush royal, gentlemen, with an ace to the head and a king next. Just j it that down in your minds until the fun is all over. Now then, what's this racket about, anyhow?"

"Don't you interfere!" exclaimed Frank, with a stamp of her foot.

"When I take charge of matters in this house I don't allow any one else to talk till I'm done. Keep quiet or I'll turn the batteries on you."

"Quiet it is when a lady talks. Settle your account with the gentleman, and then, if there is anything left of him, it will be time enough for

me to hand in my little bill. And meantime I am watching him."

"An'—hic!—I've got ther gentleman with ther shot-gun lined!" exclaimed Billy Button with owlsh gravity, as he swung an immense revolver around from under his coat and pointed in the direction of the door. "Fyar wants ter pay 'tenshun ter Tite you'd better not bother ther pard at ther door. I'll sorter hole him in check."

The proposition received no attention, and probably no one but Arden noticed it. Mr. Thompson was attracting all the interest in his direction.

He was as cool as any one there, and looked up at the lady behind the bar with his coldest smile, though he said nothing until the rest had their say.

Then he went on in a quiet, unruffled sort of way.

"Probably one of your patrons forgot to take his 'bug' along when he jumped his game. I don't know that it is anything to hang me about, even if it is the usual style at the Antelope. Count the cards, by all means. You will find them all correct, and the stranger has the winning hand. What better case would I want?"

"An' how 'bout this hyer man with ther shot-gun?" howled Button.

"Pon me soul, I b'leve he hes me kivered."

"Most likely," said Tite, speaking mildly as ever.

"If you will interfere when gentlemen are talking, and a lady listening, some such unpleasant occurrence is apt to come next. Who is the party behind the door? He don't belong to me; and if any of you fellows have lost such a pard, now is the time to speak up, before he goes over the range. I see he is in line with the wrist of my friend here, and there is doubtless a derringer under the fingers."

All this without noise or confusion. Miss Frank was being left as far out of the game as possible; and Tite Thompson was treading on the toes of no one else if he could avoid it. If it had not been for the outsider it might have been possible to have the little breeze blow over without any serious damage.

But he was an unexplained factor that bid fair to prove dangerous. Although he could not be seen by the greater part of the crowd, yet the muzzle of his gun projected beyond the door; and so far as could be seen it was aimed at Billy Button. And the muzzle of the All-around Sport's derringer was trained on the panel behind which he was supposed to be standing. If he really shot Billy it was to be presumed that about that time he would drop.

Billy Button's courage had appeared to fail him from the moment that the attention of the man was driven his way. His bluff about holding the party in check had not worked worth a cent, and he had not the nerve to shoot when he saw the barrel of the gun deliberately swing around his way.

"Seemster be some sorter a mistake goin' on hyer," rumbled a voice that was unfamiliar to the crowd. The door came open a little wider, and in stalked the man who was becoming such an object of curiosity.

"Whar ev'rybody's hevin' me lined I reckon I may's well come down, jest like Cap'n Scott's 'coon. But afore I think ser'ously ov doin' it I'll do jest one good stroke fur ther town, an' take this hyer infernal ole stick-in-ther-mud outer ther damp. Say yer prayer, Mister Button, fur I'm goin' ter spatter ther wall with yer brains in less ner forty seconds by ther watch. That's pervidin' we fine yer hev any. I'll lay ther house five to two that yer ain't. Who's takin' that?"

The man deliberately stared around him, waiting for an answer, and paying not the least attention to the danger that he was supposed to be in. He couldn't have been less concerned about it if he had been in with the crowd, and Billy had been clean on the outside.

He was a stranger to the camp, so far as looks went, though there seemed to be something familiar about him. He was a large man, with a battered hat and a ragged suit of clothes. His hair was a foot or more in length, streaming down over his shoulders, and was almost as matted and unkempt as his beard, which reached down well over his chest, and projected on either side of his face, in a fashion that looked too ridiculous to be anything but genuine. In addition to the shot-gun there was a little arsenal of weapons in sight. Altogether he had every appearance of being a hard customer.

"Quite a circus, quite a circus," murmured the sport, without dropping the hand that still rested on the back of his chair, and with which he had all along kept the intruder covered.

"I begin to think the fair proprietor has made a mistake, and that this young man's business has no relation to me. How is it, my friend? Who are you; where do you hail from, and what's the matter with Button, that you are going to dissect him? I don't think there would be any profit; but really, there would be more honor in tackling one of somewhere near your size. Put up your gun, and let us reason this thing out together."

"Put up nothin'! I'm looking ter do some damidge afore I go over the range, an' he's 'bout

there easiest piece ter begin with I kin see. Ef you jest take it easy wile I'm gettin' my hand in I'll be flyin' fur higher game later on. Oh, it ain't bluff; it's jest holy ole bizz, right erlong."

"That's all right as far as it goes, but it don't answer the rest of the bill. I don't think you are very dangerous, but we want to know something more about you, and as we can't do better we are taking your word for it—till you get done speaking."

"Thankee," taking one hand from his gun while he executed a low bow.

"I'm Johnny Jimplecute, frum up ther krick. I'm a bad man when I'm to home, an' I come down hyer ter regurlate matters, an' don't yer furgit it. I've hearn how things run at ther Antelope, an I'm goin' ter show what ther rights ov a freeborn, 'Merican cizerzen be. Let me be an' I'm soft ez mush. Rub me back ther wrong way an' you'll hear me howl! Wough! I'm a-howlin' now!"

It was a war-cry that might have raised the dead. Before it was fairly finished some one was patting him on the shoulder. When he turned with a start he was looking into a revolver, and the weapon was in the hand of the fair proprietor. She had slipped out from behind the bar, and glided toward him so silently that it was a question if any one had noted the movement until it was finished.

"I can't knock you down, sir; but I must do something. You can have thirty seconds to start for up the creek again. If you are not gone at the expiration of that time you will go somewhere else—where, no one will ever tell in this world. Now!"

The fellow put his hat back on his head, pulled out an enormous old-fashioned silver watch, and holding it up began to count:

"One; two; three; four."

The seconds were flying fast, but he did not show any sign of moving, or the least alarm over the threat, and the weapon behind it. It was known well enough to the regular frequenters of the place that when Miss Frank talked that way she meant just what she said, and that she had backed her words up more than once in similar cases, when roughs came in to take the house. If Johnny Jimplecute did not know it it was his own risk. At the Antelope, as well as elsewhere, ignorance of the law excused no one.

Every one else was obstinately silent, leaving the matter in the hands of the lady, whose brow knitted ominously as the seconds expired. Then she pulled the trigger.

CHAPTER XII.

CAPTAIN FLASH COMES OFF THE ROOF.

JOHNNY never winced, though he must have guessed what was coming, for he was staring straight in the face before him. There was a flash, a puff of smoke, and the short bark of a derringer—but no one fell.

The pistol the lady had been holding was flung violently sideways, and she staggered somewhat with it. Then she held up the harmless gun.

"Excuses appear to be in order, and I will have to beg your pardon," said the All-around Sport, rising quietly, and looking at nowhere in particular, but keeping a very sharp lookout in every direction.

"The gentleman seems to have too much nerve to go over the range after that fashion. No doubt he is a fraud, and a disturber of the peace; and like enough he was hunting me, but after all, why not give him a chance for his white alley? Suppose Mr. Thompson and I take him under our charge, and walk him down the road a little. Perhaps he won't be so bashful about revealing the nature of his business, and you will be relieved of our presence. As for this matter of cards under the table, and all that, of course Mr. Thompson's explanation goes, and I take the stakes. That satisfies us, and no one else has a ghost of a reason to kick, though it ought to make it extremely unhealthy for the man who sat there last before, if he went away a winner."

"Come on, Johnny. Take my arm, and Titus will step on the other side. You understand you are to go, peaceably if you will, forcibly if you must. But we are all going, anyhow."

There was no doubt anywhere that the speaker had just shot away the hammer of Miss Frank's weapon, and that he could just as well shoot out an eye of any one there. That ability commanded the respect of everybody. What he wanted with Johnny Jimplecute no one knew, but all were inclined to let him have him, unless it may have been Miss Frank, who turned savagely and seemed about to speak.

Second thoughts restrained her, for she turned again, and strode hastily toward the bar, leaving matters in the hands of the sport. For the first time since she opened the Antelope she found herself unable to work her will without calling in her heelers. It was a bad break on her authority, but the sport held the inside of the track, and her patrons were too well trained to interfere without permission.

At that they might join in on her side, but in the face of such marvelous shooting as the sport's

she was rather afraid to trust to them—and if she had to fall back on the crowd to exert her authority, it would be worth little enough by the time she got through.

In some deft way, that was not noticed Arden had gathered up the stakes from the table and transferred them to his pocket, without the sign of objection from Thompson—who fell in with the procession.

For Johnny made no demur, and hooked his arm in with that of the sport at its first presentation. At the door Arden looked back over his shoulder.

"I need not tell you, gents, that I am a stranger here, and know none of you. If I see any signs of intrusion I will be just as apt to think Johnny Jimplecute's friends are coming, as that they may be mine. And where chances are even for danger I am willing to shoot first, and see how it is afterwards."

Gravely did Arden step out from the Antelope; and just as gravely did the two go with him. At a convenient distance they were not only out of hearing of the saloon, but pretty well out of town. The All-around Sport halted.

"Now then, gents, face the music. The lady behind the bar had it straight as a string, and I was just waiting to pull on the man with the shot-gun before I reached for the stakes. The innocent Mr. Thompson would have dropped shortly after if he had made a protest, and I would have turned the table upside down to have satisfied the crowd. There was a heap of trouble saved then, and the question now is, do you want anything more?"

"Deed an' double, pard, ye'r 'way off," began Johnny; but the sport stopped him.

"It won't go down. You can ring in all the disguises you choose on the Flat, but when I mark a man once such changes don't count. I don't care whether you call yourself Johnny Jimplecute, Rack Runnion, or Captain Flash; it is the same man every time. You want to get even with me for the stage affair, and what followed; and you want to get me out of the road, so you can have a fair show at Saphirestein. I have been in the road and I expect to stay there. I never kill a man till I have to, but when that time arrives I make no mistakes, and he goes out of the wet without time to take his boots off. We have tried conclusions with our muscle and settled where the balance of power lay beyond a doubt. Now you have a hankering to try it over with powder and lead. All right! I'll fight you both right now. If you get away with me you are welcome to all the boodle that you find on the corpse. About half of it came from your pard, anyhow."

Slowly and steadily spoke the sport; when he was done Tite Thompson broke into a laugh that was too hearty not to be genuine.

"You have held up your end well, old top! I did my share, and I thought I was doing it so well that you wouldn't see through it. If the rest of the game didn't pan out according to contract, they can't blame me. I led right up to the racket, but Frank saw the point a little too quick, and it seems you were down on me all the time. Good enough. Count me out till the next time. From the time I raised three cards down to this blessed minute, I believe you have held me covered all the time. You seemed to have it in for Johnny, there; but all the time I was watching the other hand. As long as you didn't give me away to the crowd I didn't kick, for I know enough to let a good thing go without question. Thanks! For the business we have in view I believe we have got hold of the wrong man; and pard here had better allow his private vengeance to cool till a more convenient season. By then, maybe, he won't be so rabid."

"Are you out for keeps, or can we expect to see you further along the road? I want to give you fair warning that if we do there will be no let-up on account of the profession. And if the Judge fools around the buzz-saw it will amputate his fingers just as remorselessly as if they belonged to a worse man. You see I know what I am looking for, and I came up to the Antelope more to give you warning than for fun."

"Let the Judge play his own cards, I know nothing about them," answered Tite, for the first time showing signs of sulkiness. "I told you I was out, that's enough. After the way I have seen you hold over the odds I know you are bad medicine, and I can't mix better. Don't crowd me or I'll take the odds, and do my level best to win."

"All right," go and talk to Frank," laughed the sport. "I see that you are making eyes in that direction, and perhaps she can hold you straight. Before you start, though, we ought to settle what is to be done with Johnny Jimplecute. He is a persistent sort of a fellow; and if he keeps this thing up he may get a sight of my back some time when I don't know he is around. That would be bad for me. Eh, Johnny? Remember, I could have sent you over the range 'most any time without any danger to myself. But it has got to be a sort of game between us, and as long as I keep a fair lead I can't say but what I enjoy it. So far, I am ahead on both fun and coin, and so am in a friendly humor. What do you say? Flag of truce till I get out

of town with my gang; or is it shoot it out now?"

"Flag of truce it is!" exclaimed the man, changing his tone, and thrusting out his hand. "I don't say that we won't shoot you later on; but they don't call you one of the All-around Sports for nothing, and I admire to have seen you. If I had been a bigger fool I would have been dead long ago. I know when a man holds the drop; and you have had it right along. I never once threw you off. Good-morning! You go one way and I'll go the other; and I can promise you a fair deal for the balance of the night."

"An' how 'bout Billy Button?" queried an unsuspected listener, who had been gradually edging into hearing distance, but had only arrived in time to witness the parting.

"Pears ter me ye mout say a word fur yer ole side pard, wot's stood by yer through ther bull ov ther racket. Ef you skip ther town an' leave him 'mong these hyer wolves he won't make a mouthful 'round. Fair an' square, I ain't able fur 'em."

"Oh, you go put your head in soak a while, and then tumble off to bed; no one is going to bother with you if you don't bother with them. If they do I'll be back this way some time soon, and I'll exterminate all that's left of the gang."

"Much good that'll do me," whined Billy, turning to the sport.

"I jest heard ye fixin' it all up atween yerselves, an' now I o'rt ter know ef he's a holdin' any thing in fur me 'cause I backed yer game all both times, when yer didn't have a frien' in town 'cept Billy Button."

"Oh, come off the roof. You are entirely too previous. If you don't quit backing my hand when you are not invited there's a chance I'll drop you by mistake—and not cry over it. Your cheek under the circumstances, is surprising; I've promised a heap more than most men would, and if it don't satisfy you we will all turn in and plant you right now. What do you say, Thompson? Is it worth while to allow this imbecile to cumber the ground any longer?"

"Who is going to go to the trouble of burying him? He's the sort that live forever, because they would never be missed if they died. If you don't like him shoot him. And if it's too great an exertion, say the word and I'll do it myself."

To prove his sincerity Tite drew his revolver as he spoke, and trained it on the supposed bummer, who at once gave a yell, and a spring backward. The jarring click as the hammer went back was too much for his nerves.

"Don't shoot!" he yelled.

"Then git!"

And he got. There was nothing more to be learned there, and the odds were too great for him to stay longer.

"He's a confounded fraud," remarked Arden, by way of explanation, and then with a nod went his way, which was the same direction as that taken by Billy Button. Some men might have hurt their eyes trying to see through the back of their head, but the sport paid no further attention to the two men whom he had just checkmated in what he knew was a game for his life. He was used to risking his life on his judgment; and he did not believe that he was at fault this time. For the present the truce between them would stand—how it would be later on was a question that Arden was willing to leave to time to answer.

"One thing is certain," he muttered to himself.

"They are remarkably well posted about the old man, and intent to gather in the spoils if it lies in the wood to do it. Strikes me as being suspicious to say the least of it. They will keep it up this way all along the line; and I begin to believe that the trouble will be bigger about the time we get there. Wonder if Saphirestein has found his daughter yet. If not, there is a trifle of work not in the contract. I couldn't jump the game at the Antelope till I got the points, but I must see what is the matter. Nothing worse than a case of sparking by moonlight, I hope. Maybe they don't know it, but if she and Wilson ain't dead gone on each other my oversight has been beaten for once. What's that? Wonder if they are playing Button after all, for good luck? It may be worth while to look on and see."

There was a racket, and he hurried on, to be there in time to find out what it was about, and take a hand if necessary.

CHAPTER XIII.

ARDEN ATTENDS TO BUSINESS.

WHEELER WILSON was an unattached sport at the time that he stumbled across the Saphirestein party. That he was desperately smitten with Miss Rebecca the reader has already guessed, if he does not know. Edgar Arden was not altogether a stranger to him, either. They had drifted together more than once in this western country, and without becoming pards they had always maintained amicable relations.

At present Arden was rather inclined to think that the meeting had better have been postponed until the matter in hand was well over, and would have been willing to drop the other sport at any time, if it could have been done without direct offense. Very strangely, he overlooked

his own capacity for getting into all sorts of adventures and side issues; and was inclined to think that the other sport would be the one to introduce such things into the present expedition. As this was largely a business transaction with him he had no desire to run any extra risks of losing the handsome contingent salary that he would receive if all went well.

As far as the Flat the stage line could be rendered available; but from this point on they would have to trust to their own resources.

Arden knew how to make the most of them, and had his arrangements made in advance, but so quietly that outsiders were supposed to know nothing about them. It was on his programme to leave the town the next morning before day-break. He had come out in search of information as much as fun, and believed that he had acquired a considerable supply of both.

Though he had recognized Billy Button under his disguise, as a man who followed the trade of detective, and had no great love for him, he did not intend to allow him to be maltreated by the men who he knew were outlaws in profession, whatever might be their standing at the Flat, and whom he only refrained from exposing on account of his general principle of attending strictly to his own business.

"Sure enough, there is a riot," thought the sport as he drew near to the crowd from which the noise he had heard was arising.

"I suppose I will have to take a hand in, but I must not forget my duty to my employer. What's it all about, anyhow? Bless my soul! If I don't believe I am in it already. If not, it's the other sport, sure."

To go back a little, and explain how things had been going with Mr. Wilson and his fair charge.

He had done his work as quietly as possible, in rescuing Rebecca from her perilous position on the ledge, but he was all awake to the possibility of the ruffians reappearing, and even when he was holding the form of the fainting girl in his arms he was not for a moment off of his guard. Fortunately his coming had been unsuspected, and the trio had thought best to reach the bottom of the chasm before dismounting. By the time they had hopped their horses and returned, the sport and his charge had already started on their return to the town, and were well out of pistol range.

"Thunder an' blazes!" exclaimed one, as his head rose to the level of the plain, and he took a glance along the line of the trail they had but lately traveled.

"Scooped, by mighty! Wot are we goin' ter do now? Ther gal's safe an' sound, an' she an' a feller's hurryin' torrads ther Flat ez though thar war a call fur dinner, an' ther grub war short. Look fur yerself, ef yer don't b'leve me."

He was a pace or two in advance of the rest, but at his warning the others hastened their steps, and sprung past him. A single look told them that it was only too true. The man who had acted as leader threw up his hand; but lowered it again as he noted that a shot would serve no purpose but to put the fugitives on their guard.

"Good goods go in small packages," he muttered. "She may have had them on her, but I have my doubts about it. Reckon the game is about spieled for this time. I didn't care to take her in the start; and I feel less like trying it on now. That fellow with her looks like the sport who came in with them on the wagon; and he was no slouch if I'm not wide off. Better let them go, and try to have a hitch at the old man before he gets through. There must have been some mistake about her carrying the bundle, though it seemed to come very straight."

"Guess we'll hev ter take in ther sport afore we kin git it. It's safe ter say he are backin' up ther game, an' now might be ez good a time az any. Wot's ther matter with cuttin' 'round, an' gittin' ter town ahead ov 'em. Then we kin lay fur 'em ez they go by. Ef we kin drop the sport ther gal's our meat er not, jest ez ther rest ov ther town seems ter take it. We ain't givin' up ther game ez long ez ther wealth goes ahead ov us. Eh?"

"Oh, we are on the trail to stay; but there are more looking the same way that would be willing to hang us, right here in the Flat, to get us out of the play. Go a little slow, until we can get them where it is man to man, and then go in for all we are worth. At the same time, we can head them off and see what are the chances. We don't know there is anything to be made, anyhow."

On this basis the three sped away, taking an inside line. As Rebecca and the sport proceeded leisurely after once gaining an offing, the fellows were ahead of them before they reached the limits of the cabin, and were lurking in the shadows. It was the first place that they could lay an ambush, and they planted themselves there to be ready for events, though without a clear idea of what was to happen when the two came their way.

But, sure enough, after a little, Wheeler Wilson and Miss Saphirestein came toward them, walking swiftly, but without effort, and talking to each other in a low tone. They were so ab-

sorbed in themselves that it seemed unlikely they would notice what was going on around them. Without any definite idea of what was to follow, the leader of the three stepped out into the trail, and his comrades, never waiting for orders, stepped with him.

And just then, Billy Button came rushing along, hurrying away from the dangerous neighborhood he had lately left.

"Hyer's the chance!" whispered the fellow that was always speaking.

"A little side-racket; our cove comes along; biff! we have him. That ain't no slow game."

There was no time to discuss the subject further. Billy was there; and the two were not far distant. The three spread out, as if to let Button pass; and then closed in on him. Before he was aware of their presence he was surrounded.

As the men were no strangers to the town, they had recognized the bummer, who had a harmless reputation; and expected to have no trouble with him.

Probably they would not if he had not had his head full of Captain Flash, and the danger that he was most likely in. The moment that he recognized the movement he waited for nothing more. If he had been a handy man with the pistol he would have added to his death roll, then and there. As it was, he sprung like a flash at his nearest assailant, striking as he came.

Resistance was unexpected, and the blow went home, sending the fellow down in fine style. The stroke was beautifully delivered, but it threw him off of guard for an instant, and in that time the others were on him, one from either side.

Even then it looked as though they were to have no easy victory, for after their fingers tightened on him Billy delivered a couple of well intended upper-cuts, which were not entirely thrown away, though the gripe on either side remained unloosened. Then he made a grasp with his right hand, and a plunge with his left, getting a good hold with each. When he gave a tug and a swing the two came together in spite of everything. Then he twined his arms around them, tripped one, slung the other, and brought them both to the ground, himself on top. With most men he would have won a victory without receiving a scratch.

Unfortunately for him there was a large element of the bulldog in these fellows; and when the three went to the ground together the two hung on. They could do no particular damage, but they held on, anyhow. That gave the man who had been knocked down in the first instance time to get around to his work.

The blow had been a hard one, but not hard enough to stun—only to daze. He staggered to his feet again almost instantly, but stood looking at the three as they twined and twisted, without any clear idea that it was any affair of his.

When he saw them go down together it brought him to his senses. Drawing his heavy revolver he stole forward, standing at Billy Button's back as that individual was shaking himself loose, with a vigor that would soon have delivered him from the toils. Once he put his thumb on the hammer, as though he intended to fire; but the touch of the ridiculous in the situation, and the fear of bringing spectators restrained him. He turned the weapon in his hand, and brought it down with crushing force on the unprotected head before him.

"Ah, the man! He is one of them!" cried a female voice just at his ear, as the striker stepped back to survey his work and allow his partners full room to rise. "And they are killing someone!"

"Not very frequently," answered the cool voice of one of the All-around Sports.

"They are laying him out for fun, and I'll wager he will be none the worse in the morning. We will just pass by on the other side."

He spoke that way because he recognized Edgar Arden brushing past in a manner that indicated that he was bent on business, and because he did not care to have any more trouble on his hands than was necessary while he had the young lady in charge.

Rebecca opened her mouth to protest—but closed it again to admire. Arden lost no time in getting to work. He saw Wilson and the young lady together, guessed something of what had happened, and wanted to clear the way as soon as possible.

It was contrary to the custom of the sport, who usually gave warning before he struck; but in this case warning would be thrown away. He had the three men well bumped before him, and knew exactly where and how hard to hit. The result was a foregone conclusion. There were three distinct sounds, all of them uncomfortably suggestive, and then Arden turned to the two.

"I suppose that is part of the business, though it is not exactly the way I like to attend to it. Glad to see you safe again. The old gentleman was in no end of trouble, and I was going to start out to hunt you up as soon as I could find the time. He will be anxious till you get back. If he says anything about me say that you saw me, and I will be along in a minute."

The two delayed no longer, but hurried on to the hotel. As they separated at the door Wilson whispered: "Then if you do not see me in the morning you can look for me to join you somewhere along the trail. I can not see you and your father plunge into the dangers I believe are before you without being on hand to do my best to protect you. And my best is a great deal, if I do say it myself. If Arden plays a square game we two can meet any ordinary contingencies. If there is anything worse we must trust to luck—and that is generally on our side."

CHAPTER XIV.

BILLY BUTTON HITS A TRAIL.

FOR once in his life Billy Button felt even worse than he looked.

When he came to his senses again he was alone, and had a ripping headache. It took some little time for him to recall what had happened, and even then he was by no means certain if he recalled the circumstances correctly.

He finally decided that he had fallen on three men, and that in turn they had fallen on him; and came as near to killing him as they knew how. They had probably left him for dead, and if they suspected that he was not, they would come back and finish the job. He waited until he felt a little stronger, and then, getting up, stole very quietly away. His headquarters were in a deserted shanty, at the edge of the town, and he got there as soon as he could, feeling all the better that he met no one on the way.

"I am on the track, anyhow," he thought, as he dropped his aching head on the rough pillow formed by throwing a piece of blanket over his boots.

"I have spotted the head of the confederation, and with a little more proof will be ready to take him in. That conversation to-night was enough of itself to point out the real Captain Flash. I don't understand the game they are playing now, though it is to throw some one off the track. If the party is going on from here in the stage there will be a day or so to find out, for they can't leave before day after to-morrow. The only trouble is, they seem to have dropped to me in this shape, and it's not convenient to take any other just now. I can be easy for the present. There is plenty of time before me."

With such a comfortable presentiment in his head he fell asleep, and as his slumbers were undisturbed it was natural that he should make up for a little lost time. The sun was way up in the sky when he came wandering around to the Happy Hope, and was astounded to find out that the party on whom he expected to fix his attention for the day had sloped, bag and baggage. They seemed to have paid their bill, for the landlord was making no moan over their disappearance, and would not, or could not, give any information as to the route taken, or in what manner they traveled.

"Good glory!" thought Billy, more taken aback at this than he would have believed possible.

"How will I find out which of the trails they took—if any of them? Mexico is a wide country, and there are a good many Dons who can afford to give a wedding present of diamonds to their daughter. I am off again. It won't do to ask too many questions, and my best hold would be to try and spot any of the crowd who may be left in the Flat. If two of them are here they will meet and talk it over again, and your humble servant will be on the spot to hear. It don't always win; but this time I will make it."

It did not take much research to find out that Tite Thompson was still a resident of the Flat, and Billy, in an unobtrusive way, attached himself to him like a shadow, only leaving him at times to see if he could gather any information as to which trail Saphirstein had followed on leaving the Flat.

The disappearance seemed to have been managed by a master hand, for not a word could he hear, during the whole day, and it was only at nightfall that he dropped onto something that looked suspicious.

"As Mr. Thompson strolled away from the Happy Hope, after supper, he was met by a messenger, who handed him a note."

Thompson looked it over leisurely, smiled, nodded, and muttered:

"All right! I will be there."

Then he continued his stroll, in no wise troubled over the appointment he had just made, and certainly not suspecting that Billy Button was muttering:

"And you can bet your bottom dollar that I will be there, too, unless we both miss the spot. But who in the name of wrath sent that note? I would give a round dollar if I could get a glimpse of it."

As he had not a fair view of the face of the messenger, there was nothing for the detective to do but stick in sight of the gambler, at the risk of awakening his suspicions. And a pretty dance the sport led him for the next hour or so. It seemed to Button that every saloon in the place was visited before Thompson turned away from the more thickly inhabited part of the town.

By and by he halted, and almost instantly

was joined by the party he expected to see, and Button gave a low whistle of surprise.

"I may be blind as a bat, but I can tell a woman when I see her, even if she does sport the unmentionables. Now, who is it? Frank of the Antelope, as I am a living sinner!"

His surprise was genuine. From what he had heard and seen the previous evening these two were the last persons he would have expected to see meeting for a confidential conference, such as they opened immediately.

Button looked on a moment, and then scratched his head ruefully. As long as they remained where they were there was little chance for him to overhear any of their conversation. It was almost impossible to approach without being seen; and Tite Thompson was of the kind to shoot without remorse a lurker, whether it was a rabbit or a man.

Chance favored him, however. Some of the boys on a pilgrimage from one saloon to another made the night slightly hideous with their howling. It was possible that they would come within sight of the two, and as Thompson was by no means anxious to attract attention he said something in a low tone to his partner, and they moved away.

"Good! They will never stop now until they get to the bridge," muttered Billy. "I can get down to the water, and then take to the bank till I get right under them. What I don't hear then won't be worth much."

Sure enough, the pair kept on to the spot where Button expected next to see them halt. As they went quite leisurely he had time to put his plan in execution. When they began once more their interrupted conversation they had an unsuspected listener.

"And I say, no!" the feminine voice was saying, which he was more than ever satisfied belonged to Frank of the Antelope.

"I can do everything but trust you. Why I cannot do that you know well enough. We will not part. Where you go I will go. And if you do not take kindly to that I will kill you. That I will keep my word you know well enough."

"And after that?" asked Mr. Thompson, lightly enough, and looking with a smile at the earnest face beside him.

"After that I will kill myself," answered the woman, in the same coldly concentrated tone.

"What else will there be left for me to do?"

"There is reason enough in all things, if you would only listen to it. You cannot expect me to be tied forever to your apron string, though I am willing enough not to wander far beyond its reach, save in the line of business. In this matter that you seem to have set yourself so blindly against, all I can say is that I must have my own way. It will only be a temporary separation at the most, and there is wealth in it—which is something I begin to need after the hard run I have been having lately. By the way, if I was as superstitious as most of the profession I would say that you had hoodooed my luck, for such a vein I never struck before, in all my experience. Even last night—"

"When I showed you what a desperate woman would do."

"Exactly. If you can't have your own way you are willing to wreck me and my friends along with me. Even last night luck beat advantages, and if you had only let the matter go you would have had your revenge without showing your hand. As it was you did me a positive service. The scheme would have fallen through without your betrayal. What could have been your object?"

"Easily told. I would have slain you then and there if you had given me the chance. Oh, you may smile, but I am a desperate woman. You have deceived me once; I do not intend to give you the opportunity to do it again. Better that both of us be dead."

"That really seems to be your way of looking at things; but, unfortunately, it is not mine. All the affection in the world would be wasted on your humble adorer in case he was a corpse; and I doubt if you would have the nerve to follow me out of the cares of this world into the uncertainties of the next. I am more inclined to suspect that you would console yourself with another fellow. Until I can be certain I prefer not to pass over the range."

"Then, treat me honestly. For the sake of business it is not necessary that all the world should know I am your wife; but the Antelope would make a fortune for both of us, if you would be satisfied to give up your dubious acquaintances, and be true to me until we can leave this wild life forever."

"Then, why not trust me a little? Go on with the Antelope, which I acknowledge is a pretty little property, and one out of which money is to be coined; but give me a little liberty to add to the mutual store. Be reasonable and all else will be right."

"It is because I have trusted you, and been what you call reasonable that I refuse to be hoodwinked or deserted once more. You know now what I intend to do, and I shall warn you no more. Where you go I shall go, and when I can follow you no longer without danger of losing you, one of us, or both, will die. Is that plain enough?"

"It is plain enough that you want to make a

fight of it; and sooner than submit to your dictation a fight it shall be. If you will take a fool's advice, however, you will stay quietly at the Antelope, gather in the ducats until I get back, and keep a quiet tongue in your head. If I did not know you were better able to do that last than the majority of women I should never think of risking my neck at the Flat again. A few words from you would send me out of the world at the end of a rope, and you would be none the better off. Bear that in mind, please; and that I will see what sort of a hornet's nest you have been stirring up before I risk my neck in this bug again. Confound it, woman! why can't you keep still?"

"And that is your last word, is it?"

"My very last."

"Then I will know what to do when you leave me. This time there will be no forgiveness."

"Thanks for the warning, though I am not aware that I am in the habit of asking for the article. You are not yourself to-night, and will not listen to reason. Perhaps to-morrow you will be in a better mood, and I will see you then. Any one else would be furiously angry with you but I can make allowances. Think it all over and let me know then how you feel about it. For the present I shall say, good-night; unless you desire my escort as far as the ranch."

"He means to skip to-night, sure," thought the lurker. "He may fool her but you can bet a dollar that Billy Button goes with him."

CHAPTER XV.

HOW THE PLOT ORIGINATED—BILLY BUTTON COMES TO GRIEF, AS USUAL.

"AND thou thinkest that the wretch will come?"

"Not think, Tiburcio. Say that I know, and thou wilt have it right. It was a brilliant scheme, worthy of thy fertile brain, and thou hast no need to fear that it will miscarry. If it does, to me be the blame. It will be from some mistake of mine. All goes well, or I am more fool than I think."

"And thou hast heard from him, and that he was on the way?"

"Even so. Oh, Silvio is a friend to be proud of. When I appealed to him as the life-long friend of the family, most nobly did he respond. To all that I asked did he agree without a murmur, only asking that Raquel should never know anything of the plot—or of its ending, if that be possible. Not one man in ten thousand would there be who would run such risks to help a friend to vengeance. Ah, this time I have the accursed Jew on the hip."

"Be not too sure. He is sly as a fox, and he will not be apt to trust himself and his diamonds where thou canst reach him without taking some precautions. Beware lest he have some trap laid for thee, ready to be sprung in the hour of thy success. I had a dream last night, and it seemed in that the Jew was tripping, and there was red blood on the ground. Was it thine, or mine?"

Tiburcio spoke gloomily. His companion, who knew him well, looked at him in some surprise. It was not in his nature to be shrinking at the sight of danger; and in this case it was not, so far as could be foretold, Tiburcio, but his friend, that would be taking the risk.

The two men were Mexicans, who, from their dress, and manners, belonged to the upper class. In fact Don Mauricio was of one of the oldest families in the province, and possessed landed estates of vast extent. He was a man beyond the point of middle age in life, though not so old that his passions were dulled, or his strength departed. There were few finer looking men among the neighboring rancheros, or who could ride further in a day.

Espigador had but few friends. He was taciturn to moroseness at most times, and had a savage way about him, of avenging what he construed to be an insult, that made him one to be avoided rather than courted. Perhaps if it had not been for his daughter, Raquel, who presided over his ranch, the place would have lacked any visitor save Tiburcio from one end of the year to the other.

But these two men understood each other, and had their confidences. They had known each other intimately for years; and though Tiburcio Creanza was not credited with either wealth or an old name, and was a far younger man than Don Mauricio, they seemed well satisfied with the company of each other; and where one was to be found the other was pretty certain to be seen.

As for Raquel, she was a young lady of much beauty, and a disposition that was altogether the reverse of her father's. She had been petted and spoiled by him all along the way of her young life; and the ranch on her account was never altogether lonesome. Whatever softness there was around the heart of the Don had been brought there by the daughter whom he idolized. She had man-servants and maid-servants in plenty, and a companion who was almost her equal in youth and beauty, though a direct contrast in appearance and nationality. Helen Hatton was a young American lady, who

had drifted over into Mexico without knowing very well where she was going or what was to be the nature of her duties.

The Don had come across her in San Francisco, at the boarding-house of her aunt, some little time after she had been left an orphan. At that time she was just beginning to be self-supporting, through the pupils in music she was gathering around her, but she was also finding the labor too hard for her. When Espigador spoke, first to her aunt and then to her, the opportunity to become the companion to a young lady of her own age, who was beautiful and accomplished, and at a salary much beyond anything she could hope to earn for years, seemed too good to be lost, and she accepted at once.

She and Raquel soon became the best of friends, and once on the ranch the distinction of employer and employee was almost entirely forgotten, and they were inseparable friends.

Donna Raquel had plenty of suitors after she came to marriageable age, but she did not delay her choice very long. Don Silvio came early in her life, and he came often. He was also fine looking, agreeable and wealthy. He pleased her father and he pleased her. Their coming nuptials had been spoken of, and so far Raquel could not see a sign of a cloud arising on her horizon. If Espigador had not known him a great deal better than his daughter did he would scarcely have dared to make to him the proposition that has been hinted at.

"If the best laid plan go wrong the fault will be neither mine nor thine. What is it that has made thee so gloomy? Surely, a dream would not turn Tiburecio into a woman. I have known thee too long and well. It must be thy liver, man! And that always views things from the wrong side. He is already on the way. He will bring with him a fortune in jewels. He will come secretly, so that custom-house men shall know naught of what he carries. He will drop into my hands, and no one will be the wiser. Then, in the cave on the mountain, he shall know who it is that nath him; shall hear something of the past; and shall finally perish as I have sworn a thousand times that he should, by my hand. It was a grand scheme, to have Silvio engage him to bring the necklace, and the other diamonds, that he might purchase them as a bridal gift. If he can evade the duty the profit will be so much the greater, and Saphirenstein will win the last penny that is to be made in a traffic."

"And if he comes to Silvio, having eluded thy hands, what then? I confess the scheme has dangers that I thought not of when first I named it."

"Then Silvio will buy the jewels—at the price they are well worth the money—and Moses falls into my hand laden with coin instead. It is not the wealth I require, though it should be all mine if justice were done; but vengeance, that is dearer to my soul than gold could be."

"But he will fight desperately."

"Let him fight. Tomasso and his men will take care of that. They are already in wait, though he cannot be here for a week yet. They have their orders. In all, my hand shall not appear until the last moment when I unveil the face of the man he hath wronged, and gloat over the fear that gathers in his eyes. The scheme was all thine; and for it I thank thee."

"Civility counts until thou and I shall turn out. Perhaps, then, thou wilt wish that Tiburecio had been less free with his schemes. He half-regrets them now. But, no matter. Let it go at that. Saphirenstein will come; nor will he be a day behind, let happen what will. The rest is thy affair, though in whatever a friend can aid, command me."

"I understand thee, Tiburecio, and do not doubt but that thy hand will be with me, whenever needed. So he be not treacherous, and have some scheme back, which will take me at a disadvantage, all will be as successful as thou couldst ask. I fear more that Silvio may lose his head. He is a man in love, and such do strange things at times. If Raquel knew, she might help him away. Women are tender-hearted, and they would mar the best of plans if the notion seized them."

"Silvio's word will be better than his bond. Once passed and his lips will never open. So Raquel gains no inkling elsewhere, and questions him at a disadvantage, there is no danger there. Yet count not on him to aid thee further. He is too soft of heart to follow thy lead to the end."

The mood of Tiburecio appeared to change, his face lost its gloomy look, and if words of encouragement were needed, he would have been ready to speak them. Espigador held up his finger in warning.

"Not another word. It may be that he did not understand fully my plan, and it is needless, as thou sayest, to explain further. I hear his footsteps. Perhaps he seeks for Raquel. The child has ridden out with her friend, but for an ardent lover it will be no hard task to find them."

By the time the Don ceased speaking Silvio made his appearance.

A finer-looking young man it would be hard to imagine. His costume of a Mexican caballero set off his figure to the best advantage, and

its richness showed the wealth and position of its owner.

As Espigador had surmised, he was in search of his betrothed, and though he saluted the two courteously enough, he was evidently in haste to be off.

When he had received what information the Don could give him, he bowed once more, though this time he did little more than nod, and left the presence of his prospective father-in-law without giving him a chance to ask any questions. It seemed to him that Espigador had something on his tongue to say to him, and he did not wait for it.

"Strange it is that she could not be waiting for me. It was her own word that I should join her to-day, and at this time. Perhaps she lingers somewhere near. If not, it will not be hard to find which way she went, and then overtake her."

He went out confidently enough, and by chance obtained the information of which he was in quest, from the first peon he met.

Then he put spurs to his steed and galloped away. The girls had a long start, if they had not meantime drawn rein; and there was much lost ground to be recovered if he wanted to serve as their escort on the ride which he now understood they were undertaking.

"What willful freak is this?" he thought to himself, as he sent his horse along at a steady pace, that got over the ground at a rapid rate, but which, if need be, could be maintained all day.

"With all the plain before them, where they would be in sight of the ranch, and almost safe, they must ride alone for the mountains! There are men enough to hate the name of Espigador, who would be none too good to capture his daughter, and hold her for ransom. If it is a visit to Brigada that she is intending it may be well for her if I am within calling distance. The old witch has some strange friends, and is not to be trusted when there is a chance to satisfy either avarice or hate."

As he thought it over a nervous fear began to possess him that something had happened, or would happen to the young ladies. His thoughts were fixed on them, and his eyes were looking straight forward and ahead. He did not notice what was nearer to him, and a little to one side of his range of vision. He was startled and surprised to hear a good, round, hearty voice hail him from a clump of mesquites, past which he was about to gallop.

"Hillo, mister! ef yer white hev a leetle pity on pore Billy Button, who's robbal, an' murdered, an' left hyar, all tied up ter starve."

Silvio, in his time, had lived some years in the States, and could understand the language like a native; but to hear the Anglo-Saxon tongue, even as the fellow in the bushes spoke it, was so unexpected that he did not answer, though he reined in promptly, and dropped his hand for a weapon. Then he looked in that direction, and could see the figure of a man, stretched on the ground, and so trussed up with cords as to be beyond motion, and one would almost think, of breath.

CHAPTER XVI.

FROM WITCH TO WAR—A LADY TO THE FRONT.

EVERY ONE knew who Brigada was. She lived in the cave in the mountains, and was known to all about the past, present and future; and to tell what she knew about them for a sufficient consideration, provided she was in the mood for it.

It was never a certainty that she would be found at her den, however. She spent a great deal of her time wandering around the country. She was tolerated at all the ranches for leagues around, and at some she was a welcome visitor. She rode a small, coal-black mustang when she was on one of these excursions; when at home the steed was turned loose in a little valley that was below her eyrie. He could go like the wind when she was on his back; and as no one else had ever been known to attempt to ride him it was generally believed that no one else could.

Brigada was bent, wrinkled and black in the face, and uncanny in her looks. If it had not been for a superstitious dread about offending her she would not have been apt to receive a cordial welcome when she went on her excursions; but she was the sort of a woman that would have a fair clientage of visitors. There is a difference between consulting a witch in her den, and receiving her as a guest, especially as there was never a certainty of how long she intended to stay when she came.

Raquel and her companion were not naturally curious as to the future, but they were fond of adventure, and life was sometimes stagnant at the ranch. Even Don Silvio's visits began to grow at times monotonous, and the young lady felt as though she would enjoy a brief separation, for the sake of the pleasures of anticipation of meeting him again. The idea had struck her that there would be some amusement in disappointing him that afternoon; and as an excuse for doing so she proposed the visit. If they did not find the witch at home it would be no great disappointment.

Of course, Helen Hatton was ready to agree to whatever she proposed, and so it was that the

two rode off together, taking with them no one save a lad that was a sort of factotum on the ranch, but who was more particularly attached to the service of his young mistress. As they had picked him up at the last moment his presence with them was not reported to Silvio when he was making his inquiries; and had he known of it he would scarcely have felt any relief.

Yet the lad was brave enough, and shrewd enough, to be a great deal better than he looked; and was a thoroughbred American to boot. He had drifted to the ranch some months before, and had gained the confidence of Raquel, which seemed to be all that he cared for. She could talk with him in his own language, and she it was who kept him from wandering still further. He was a rough little vagabond; but his mistress could not have found a more trustworthy servitor, even among those who had been born and bred on the place.

"Yo'll find her at home, all right, and don't yer furgit it," remarked the boy, who was known only as Harry, since the time that Miss Hatton had addressed him by that name.

"How do you know?" asked Raquel, looking sharply at him to see if it was jest or earnest that he was speaking.

"Ef a blind man only looked real sharp he couldn't help seein' her pony down in ther holder. When that's at home she's at home. You see him down yonder, amblin' 'round? Ef she's no visitors, I reckon the trip will be all hunky dory, an' you'll have a chance ter do all ther talkin' she kin swaller. Only, yer wants ter go a leetle careful. Mebbe she ain't alone, an' then yer wants ter re-tire. Wouldn't keer about coming here by meself, so I wouldn't, now. Need some pertecter, sech ez a female girl. Ef anythin' happens, mind, you ain't ter throw off on me. I'm on'y a poor leetle orphing, and the old woman wouldn't make two bites ov me, ter say nothin' ov ther frien's a-waitin' fur a nibble at the cheild."

"Hush, Harry!" exclaimed Miss Hatton, though she laughed at his lugubrious tone. "We do not need your warning to make us walk circumspectly, and it may be just as well not to run any risk of her overhearing your nonsense. We can see the mustang for ourselves, and the rest is all guess-work, that may as well be left unsaid. It would be best if you said nothing further until we are this far on the return home. Your mistress will say everything that is necessary."

"Right you are—and a heap sight more. I'm as dumb as a clam. Hyer goes!" And Harry clattered on ahead, at a great rate. In a very little time longer the three drew rein before the entrance to Brigada's den.

The door was open, and they could catch a glimpse of the room within.

At the coming of her visitors the bent and doubled old crone came creeping out to greet them.

"Ah, ha! Brigada knew that they were coming, and she heard their talk while they came along. They think they will amuse themselves with the old witch of the mountain. When she speaks there will not be the laughter you hoped for. Those that come to Brigada to smile sometimes go away to weep. Come in, come in! I have much to tell you both."

The salutation was a surprise. The woman generally was wary of announcing evil fortune until her palm had been crossed. If the doctress was sufficiently large she sometimes forgot to mention it altogether.

"Wait until you have seen the lines in our hands, good mother. It may be that you have mistaken us for what we are not! Somehow I feel that I was born for nothing but good fortune in this world. So far, at least, I cannot see that I have had anything else, and I know no reason why the luck should change. I have learned one thing, however. You are no Mexican, as all suppose."

"Thinkest thou so?" asked the woman, changing her speech without hesitation. "One tongue is the same as another to Brigada. She uses that which best suits the listener, when she wishes to talk so as to be understood. True, Raquel, heretofore thou hast never known a sorrow, and thy lot hath been cast in pleasant places, but all that may change. If thou art some one else, and that some one else art thou, it may make a difference when all come or go to their own. If thou wert turned adrift in the world, without wealth or relative, and Don Silvio should be as false as all men are, thou wouldst think that Brigada knew even better than she said. These things may happen, and unless the stars deceive me, they will."

She was solemn and impressive. There was no evidence in her tone that she was speaking at random, or for the sake of alarming her visitors. With such an accent of truth in her tones, it was not hard to understand why those who consulted her were believers in what she said.

Raquel was impressed in spite of herself. What young girl would not be at the appearance of a mystery in the horizon?

"What is it that you mean? Surely, all the world knows that such words cannot apply to me. Speak plainer, woman; or else acknowledge that you are but seeking to have me load thy palm with a larger gift than I had pur-

posed. I will stake my life on the truth of Silvio; and for the rest: it is but the sheerest nonsense. My family is as old as the country, and about my birth there has never been any mystery. You would not have dared to say this if my father had been present."

"I dare to speak the truth, as the stars tell it to me, at all times. If thy father only dared to hear it, well would it be. That thou art thy father's daughter, yes. That thy father is he whom he has claimed to be, no. When the revelation comes there are those living who will hunt him from the face of the earth; and thou wilt be left alone. And as for thy lover, not likely is it that he will be true when he once knoweth thy true name and breeding. I will take no gold nor silver from thee until the hour that thou knowest how truly I have spoken. Meantime, beware!"

As she concluded the witch wheeled away from the door of the hut, at which she had been standing. She intended to close the conference right then and there. She did not even turn her head when Miss Hatton spoke.

"One moment, my good woman. You have been so generous with my friend that I have a mind to ask a question or two on my own account. Here is silver. I care not to know of the past, what have you to tell me of the future?"

She flung a coin so that it dropped at Brigada's feet, and waited the answer with a smile on her face. Evidently the witch had no terrors for her.

It looked as though there was a struggle in the woman's mind. She halted, turned slowly, and picked up the silver. Then she half-closed her eyes, looking into vacancy while she mumbled:

"Thou hast flung me silver, I fling thee back such fortune as I see in the future. If it pleases thee, or not, it is all that the stars will show to thee. Thy lover is on the way; and so is the man of the law who is after him. Which will be slain I know not as yet, but as he is thy destiny, most likely it is that the officer will be the fated one. Be proud of him, for his hands are red with blood, and he comes to do more murder. Take heed that he does not involve thee in his own doom. There is wealth in store for thee; but it is flooded with crimson; and thy dearest friend will be stricken down to reach it. Go thy way now. All these things will come true before thou hast had time to forget them. Wilt thou laugh then, as now?"

This time she did not hesitate; but hurried out of sight of the visitors. They looked at each other blankly, more impressed than they cared to own. Harry broke the silence:

"Kinder, sorter don't feel frien'ly, I sh'd say. Wouldn't like ter hev them lean fingers clutchin' round me throat in ther dark. Would stran'le ye 'thout winkin'. Better keep a eye on sich ez those. Ef ther fun's over better be goin' right now, too. They say she kin han'le a carbine; an' ef she begun shootin' whar would we be; oh, whar?"

"No doubt, discretion is the better part of valor. We will retire at once, while we can do it in good order. But whether there is any truth in it or not, I wish I knew what she really meant."

While Raquel spoke she urged her steed into a fast walk, and the others followed her. At the uncertainty in her voice Helen Hatton broke into a laugh.

"I declare, I believe you are half in mind to take seriously what the old wretch said. Better do as I am doing: laugh at the nonsense she spouted, and as soon as possible forget all about it. Surely, she could not have given me a much worse fortune if she had taken a week to formulate it. 'His hands are red with blood, and I am to gain wealth that is stained with crimson!' I am afraid there is some mistake. I know no gentleman of that stamp; and I would not touch wealth if I had to come by it in any such way as that. You have served the object you had in view; and now I care not how soon we hurry back. If we do not meet Don Silvio on the way I shall be very much mistaken."

"You can be sure we will not go out of our way to avoid him. I rather wish that we had brought him with us. Perhaps the woman could have seen something better in the future if we had had a stronger escort."

"Pooh! There is no danger in front of us; and I shall continue to laugh at all that is behind. Now, for a scamper down the mountain! Come."

They rattled away at a lively gait for some time, until Raquel suddenly drew rein.

"There is war in front of us, what shall we do? Listen to the firearms!"

CHAPTER XVII.

TOMASSO GETS HURT.

THERE was always an hour or so, some time before daybreak, when the streets of the Flat were deserted. Those who had been painting the town red had crawled or staggered off to bed or bunk, and it was a little too early for the rest of the inhabitants to be abroad.

It was at this time in the morning that Edgar Arden led Saphirestein and his daughter quietly away from the Happy Hope. They carried

no luggage with them, and they strolled onward as though they were in no great haste. If any one who had no particular interest in their movements had met them, they would scarce have attracted more than a second glance. Arden was so far ahead that he scarcely seemed to have any connection with the others, and he never looked over his shoulders until they were all out of the town, and half a mile down the southern trail.

Then the sport turned off sharply, and was soon lost to view. When father and daughter reached the turning-place they followed suit. In a few moments they were together again, in a little copse of trees, where a man was stationed, in charge of three horses.

"All right, Cap. Trust your Uncle Ezra to do the work up according to Hoyle. If any one saw me get the anamiles out of town, I'll agree to eat them. Nothing like big pay to sharpen up a man's wits. Good luck be with you; and I wouldn't care if I was going along."

"Wouldn't care, either," responded Arden; "but it's too late to make the arrangement. Keep a mum mouth, and when I come this way again I'll make it right with you."

With this for a leave taking the three climbed into their saddles, and started on their journey once more, still pursuing a course at right angles to the southern trail; while the man who had been in waiting made his way back to the Flat by a devious course, which would have been difficult to trace to its starting point.

When Saphirestein engaged the sport to guide him to the Batihoya Ranch he knew what he was about, or else was aided by a lucky chance. The country was simply a printed page to the sport, who seemed to know every line at a glance. He followed no trail, and never appeared where he might have been expected; but all the time he won his way toward his journey's end, by a route that was little further than the direct line.

In that he was following the instructions under which he had been engaged. He believed that he had escaped the eyes he knew were watching for him at the Flat; and he kept from falling into any possible ambushade along the road. There were dangers that belonged to the lonesome plains and desolate mountains through which they passed, but he eluded them one after another, until he was at last within a day's ride of the ranch, and Saphirestein drew a long breath, as he declared that they must be out of danger. Nothing had been seen of Captain Flash, or the men of the Flat who were after him, and they must be far behind; while it was not likely that any one else would be aware of their errand, or be in waiting for them.

"Don't be too sure of that. If I were you I would not rest easy until under the roof of Silvio; and I wouldn't trust the confounded Greasers any too much, then. I don't know much about your business, and I know still less of the party you are going to meet; but on general principles I would say, keep your eyes open, and don't lose your head because you are near the end of the journey. That's the time a man is generally taken in. I would feel a heap sight easier if your daughter was not along. I tell you, we may have to make a run for it yet."

Moses laughed amiably.

"Id vos a chance to make feefty per schent. Dot is vorth der reesk."

"All right, Moses. It is your neck that is going under the noose. I intend to come out right side up, and will do what I can for you and your daughter. How much that will be the next hour or so will probably show. If I can take you through that my work will be done, and you will have to look out for yourself. It begins to look as though the bandits might live around here; and if they do you can be sure they won't let us get by without trying to see what is in your pocket. Be ready for them when they come. I would just as soon that Wheeler Wilson was in the party, but as you told me to drop him there was nothing else for me to do."

"Mine craycious, no! I do not vant him. He vas the piggest robber of dem all. It vos handy to have him when der Captain Flash vos to der vront, but der vos no use for him now."

"More, perhaps, than you think for. He is a reasonably honest man, and shoots very straight. Ah!"

The sport ceased speaking and reined in his horse, a movement that was duplicated by his two companions. His quick eye had seen the thing that he had been all along expecting, and he was ready for it on sight. He rolled off his horse, and drew his revolvers just as a loud voice ordered:

"Halt!"

"We halted long ago, now, you show up; and don't be long about it either. Hands up, and step forward, or I'll open fire!"

There was no difficulty in telling where the challenge came from, and it was certain that whatever force was in lurking was all on the one side of the trail.

Of this fact the sport had taken advantage, and by making a bulwark of his horse had himself pretty well protected from everything but the closest shooting, though his hands appeared, reaching over his saddle, and each of them held

a revolver. His answer was such a complete astonisher that it was followed by utter silence. Only a moment did the sport wait.

"I said something just now, and I meant every word that you heard me utter. Time is flying, and we don't care to lose it. Step out or show the reason why. Last time of asking."

The ambuscaders could not see his face, but they could guess that it looked very determined. The man who had ordered the halt found his tongue.

"Why, you infernal fool, we are a dozen here to your one, and if we just let go it would riddle you before you could fire a shot. Besides that, we have nothing to do with you, unless you have it so. Pass along, my friend, keep your eyes fixed to the front, and don't stop until you get to the foot of the pass. I'll guarantee that you go through all right. Our business is with the other party and we are bound to have him. We don't want to do extra work or you would have been dead by this time."

"Young man, I have you lined. You are only the cat's-paw of your gang, set up because you can talk a white man's tongue. If you don't step out with hands up I'll shoot you through the right shoulder, and then cut loose on the rest."

Short and sharp were the words of the sport. They seemed like an exaggerated bluff; but there was a reason for it that the lurkers saw, and which stirred them up to action. Saphirestein had not been idle during the temporary delay. He too had slid off of his horse on the further side, and without waiting to parley had dashed away. Almost before they could note what he was about he was out of sight.

The sport saw the action without seeming to notice it; and knew what would be the result. In fact, he was waiting for some such movement on the part of his employer. He hesitated no longer. He had located the fellow with whom he had been talking, and pulled trigger just as half a dozen shots came hurtling from the cover.

A short yell told Arden that he had put the shot right where he had promised; for, though the bullets were flying around him, he was cool as a cucumber. He did not stop to congratulate himself, either. The instant a head rose up he marked its owner, and had his batteries trained accordingly. Crack! Crack! Crack! Three shots he fired, without haste or hesitation.

Then his horse, stung by a number of balls, which had struck him more or less deeply, bounded away with a snort of pain and fear.

That left the sport unmasked; but he did not care for that. He knew about the sort of men he was dealing with. They were nothing marvelous as pistol-shots; they had thrown away the contents of their carbines; and there was an instant when he would have them at a disadvantage, of which he knew how to make the best use. Without hesitation he dashed boldly forward, firing as he went.

It is always the unexpected that is the most terrible. The fact of one man resisting an ambushade of this kind was enough to shake the nerves of the Mexicans who composed it; and when it came to this charge against them, with a man dropping to every shot as he burst through the undergrowth, it was more than they could stand. The survivors turned, and ran away: Tomasso first of all, but the rest of them so well up that the lot could have been covered with a table-cloth.

Arden did not care to press his victory too far, nor did he wish to wait for the gang to recover courage and come back at him. He could see that there were large odds against him, and luck might not continue to run his way. Besides, he had to look after Saphirestein, who was going at railroad speed when last seen, and might be a mile from the spot by this time. He turned back as soon as the Mexicans had vanished.

In so doing he came upon the fellow who had acted as spokesman. He was seated with his back against a tree, and his left hand holding his right shoulder. Between his fingers the blood was oozing out and he looked quite miserable.

At the same time he saw, to his delight, the face of Saphirestein, who had recognized on which side victory had perched, and was returning. That gave him a little time for investigation.

"Hello, my friend! Perhaps you begin to understand that some things can be done as well as others. Next time I hope you will take good advice that is kindly meant, and drop out of the ruction while there is time. All the better for me, though. It gives me a chance to find out what this is all about. Come, now, open out, clean the bedrock. The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. What gang is this, and what do you mean, attacking peaceable travelers? Who paid you for trying it on, and why didn't he tell you what sort of a hair-pin you would find in your humble servant? Didn't you know it was morally a case of suicide, tinkering around with yours truly? Talk fast, or go over the range. I am in dead earnest."

"If you have half-sense you ought to know the truth without telling," growled the man,

who had, as Arden suspected when he first heard his voice, a decidedly American face.

"It's our business. We heard a man was coming this way with wealth, and we laid for him. Now, if you're white you'll tie up this hole in my arm, and then go on. Blast the Greasers, anyhow! They never did have sand for the profession. A man had better try the rifle alone. I'll be even with them some day, for this, if it takes a wheel off."

"I hate to kill a wounded man," said Arden slowly, "but there are cases when it is justifiable after hearing such bosh. Say your prayers."

The sport deliberately cocked his pistol and raised it to a level. It seemed as though the shot was coming, and the fellow closed his eyes, but he uttered never a word.

And then came a little, feminine cry, as Raquel, followed by her two companions, dashed upon the scene.

"Hold!" she exclaimed sharply.

"Do not slay an unresisting man; and he wounded!"

CHAPTER XVIII. SILVIO'S INVITATION.

"ALL right, miss! If you know better what to do with him than I do, why, take him. He belongs to me by the right of conquest, but I can't say I want him very badly. Fact is, I can come nearer to the truth by guessing than by listening to anything he would say. Better pillow his burning head on your lap until his friends return; and we will pass on. I am a full grown man, but I must say that I consider the climate here too unhealthy to linger."

"But who are you, sir; and what is the meaning of this?"

"Just what I was asking the gentleman against the tree; and he wouldn't give me any answer. He and some half dozen friends waylaid us, and took their shots all around. If I am not on the other side of the divide it is not for want of good intentions on their part. Perhaps you can get him to explain—I couldn't."

The sport was watching the young lady closely. He was by no means certain, at first sight, that she did not belong to the gang, or that she would not be guilty of some treachery if she found the opening for it.

Raquel looked around her, and shuddered in spite of herself.

"It appears to me that the killing has all been on the one side; and that of itself is suspicious. We are only two women and a boy, but we take the side of the right, always, and at whatever cost."

"Perfectly right, miss. My friends, whom you see in the background, are on their way, under my guidance, to the Batijoja Ranch. I judge it is not far distant. Perhaps you would serve as escort, and I can explain the rest as we go along. As for the bodies—of course, when it came to quick shooting, in downright earnest, the chances were that I would get away with the gang. They trust to wind too much, and don't take naturally to fine work."

The sport spoke carelessly, but there was so much good earnest in what he said that it proved reasonably convincing. And by this time the glance of Raquel had fallen upon Saphirestein, who had moved forward, with his daughter by his side, and was staring at the young lady after what she could not help but think was a singular fashion. The presence of Rebecca was a surprise, also. She remembered now that the sport had said the party was on the way to the Batijoja Ranch, and the words had more meaning in them when she had a view of the pair that he was piloting. Rebecca was beautiful, and her face had the lines of an innocent woman about it. She could not be in league with assassins; although she might not be precisely the young lady who would care to see a guest in the mansion of her betrothed. She returned to the courteous habits of her country.

"Pardon me for my suspicions. When one meets strangers after such work as this has been done it is well not to be too careless. I am convinced; and to prove it will take upon myself the task of guiding you to the hacienda of Don Silvio. No doubt you could find it easily enough, but I confess that I would as soon travel for the present in company. It is certain that there have been some desperate men here, and I should not care to meet them. Don Silvio will furnish us an escort from there; though beyond his ranch the road is probably safe enough."

"Thanks for the offer, though doubtless the directions we have had are correct enough to enable us to find the place. So far, we have found them reliable. As for this fellow, the best plan will be to let him be here, trussed up as he is. There is nothing serious about his wound and his pards will no doubt return, in time, to bury their dead, or look after their living. If not, I can come out in the morning, and see what has become of him. It may seem like cruelty to a wounded man; but considering they hang men for such little diversions as he has been engaged in, he gets off well under the circumstances. We have no time to waste if we wish to be installed under the Don's roof before nightfall. If you have far to ride perhaps it would be best for you to make up your mind to

either run the gantlet direct from here, or remain at Silvio's over night. Darkness comes early, and the moon rises late."

The lips of the senorita curved with a peculiar smile, but she said nothing, simply bowing a general assent to all the sport had said.

Meantime the latter was completing the work of tying up his prisoner. He had already bandaged his shoulder, after a rough but effective way, and the balance of the work did not take him long, especially as he really cared but little whether or no he made his escape, once the party was fairly out of gunshot range. When he had finished Raquel led the way.

Perhaps it was fortunate that Tomasso and his brigands had retreated at right angles to the route the party was to follow, and that they had not halted until they had reached a point so distant that they saw nothing of this meeting, and could not return until after the party had left the spot. In this way the road was left open for the advance, and it would be almost impossible for another ambuscade to be fixed.

Once or twice Arden looked back over his shoulder, to make sure that there was no immediate pursuit, and then he rode on quite at his ease. He was satisfied that there could not be another surprise while they were traversing the broken ground of the mountain-side, and after they were once in the plain he had little fear of gentlemen of Tomasso's quality.

After his usual fashion when on duty, Mr. Arden attended strictly to business, and for some time said nothing to any one. Under the circumstances it required a direct address to draw him out.

Saphirestein was not so reticent. He drew up by the side of Raquel, and opened a conversation. As he spoke with care his dialect was not quite as conspicuous as usual; but there was little danger of the young lady mistaking him for anything but the German Jew that he was. He addressed his conversation entirely to her; but from time to time he cast inquisitive glances toward Helen Hatton.

That young lady had been an interested spectator all through, but she had not said a word, nor had her friend mentioned her name, or thought it worth while to introduce her to the new arrivals. And yet every one was watching everybody with more than ordinary interest, and thinking that there was something familiar about the faces that in the natural order of things they had probably never seen before.

Some confidences, or some queries, would have come out of all this had it not been for an interruption. As they came to a spot where the plain really began to melt into the mountain a single horseman made his appearance, at no great distance.

He had not at all the appearance of a brigand, and as Raquel recognized him on sight, with a glad cry that she could not repress, the strangers knew that he must be a friend, even before she turned to Arden.

"Yonder is the man you seek, since he is Don Silvio himself. With him at hand, I do not think there will be any danger of a renewed attack. These men in the mountains know well enough whom it is safe to meddle with, and choose strangers, who may disappear and no great number of questions be asked. But they care not for hard raps, or having a hue and cry from the whole district, which would be raised if they undertook to interfere with the Don."

"Dot ish id, no toubt," muttered Moses. "Dey would sooner reek der chances vid a poor vayfaring man, dan dake a big gun, v'ot might bring dem a mint of monish. V'ot volishness! Ven the Don not furnish me der monish, v'y coul't no further go mine own self. So dot ish Batijoja! Von fine man; von very fine man! He vill make you one grand husband, my teer; but ton't pe doo zerdain of him dill you gets him. Der may pe some mishdake at der last minute. If you vos doo sure it might preak your heart."

Miss Hatton heard the words of the Jew, low as they were spoken.

"Has he been dealing with the witch of the mountains, or is it only chance that has made him her mouthpiece? It sounds very like to what she was saying. I wonder what he would say to me if I was to ask his paternal advice? Perhaps yonder man is the destiny she promised me; and he might give me important points on his employee—for such he seems to be. Shall I speak to him?"

Miss Helen had leaned forward in her saddle, and turned her head so that the motion of her lips could not be observed, and she was careful not to speak louder than a soft whisper. No doubt it was all a joke to her; and she was certainly unprepared for the frown with which her words were greeted.

"Hush! Though I cannot point to any reason for it, I begin to think there may have been more in the witch's words than we at first gave them credit for. Watch these people without seeming to do it. They are not here for any good; and Brigada may be a confederate of theirs, saying what she did to serve some end that as yet we cannot see. I am glad that Silvio comes. I would not care to be the one that would introduce them to his ranch."

Before Helen had time to reply Silvio was at hand, and Raquel had ears for no other. He doffed his sombrero to the party, as he came up; but his words were for Raquel.

"*La bien Maria* be praised! I find thee safe. Foolish wert thou to risk thy life or thy liberty in such spot as that where Brigada makes her den. And there is double danger just now, as I have lately learned. Another time, if thou wilt wander so foolishly, choose a more fitting escort. But who are these?"

"They are persons to whom I have perhaps been indebted more than I have yet acknowledged," responded Raquel, somewhat coldly, but with a graceful wave of her hand.

"No doubt you have been referring to the self-same bandits with whom I found them waging war. If they had not been holding their own so well the outlaws might have transferred their attention to me. As it was they had decidedly the best of the fight; and as they were seeking your place I agreed to guide them thither. So far, we have come together; but as you are able to do the honors in person it may be as well to turn them over to you, and make all haste home. They are anxious enough about me there, no doubt; and I care not for a night ride, nor for the other alternative—a night at the Batijoja Ranch."

She raised her rein as she ceased speaking, as though she would pass on.

"Foolish child! Can nothing teach thee wisdom? If thou hast all the hate for me that thou art trying to show I would not let thee take the ride alone. A moment! If thou wilt not go with us to the ranch—where none would receive so cordial a welcome as thyself—let me speak a word with these people, and then I will go with thee."

"Time and Raquel wait for no man," said the senorita, willfully; and touching her horse lightly with her whip the animal bounded away at a pace that must have satisfied his mistress, since it was almost racing speed.

"Make thyself at home till I come!" the Don shouted; and, without hesitation, darted in pursuit.

CHAPTER XIX.

IN THE RANCH, AND TROUBLE BREWING.

THE departure of the two was so abrupt that even Miss Hatton and the boy who had been doing escort duty were left behind.

Very coolly did these two look after the flitting figures, without making any movement toward joining them. Then, while Saphirestein stared blankly around, and Rebecca's face assumed a troubled look, Helen broke into a laugh.

"Don't be dumfounded, Harry, my boy. I can't say that I want to thrust my company on them any more than they desire it; and I am not exactly up to a *tete-a-tete* ride with such a brilliant cavalier as yourself. Let them go. They will forget all about us; and meantime I propose to accept the invitation as heartily as it was made, and see what the Batijoja Ranch looks like when its owner is away. If you good people want to reach it before sundown you had better waste no more time staring after those mad lovers, but follow me at your best pace. I know the way as well as the senorita. Make ourselves at home! Of course we will! Come on, Harry! We can go the whole distance at a gallop; and the sooner I can get out of the saddle the better I will be satisfied."

Moses shook his head; Rebecca looked somewhat timid, and the sport more amused than anything else. The upshot was they all went together without further discussion, and reached the hacienda about the time that Raquel and her gallant entered the presence of Espigador.

Of course Don Silvio had a *major domo*, who could do the honors of the house when the master was absent. Miss Hatton was no stranger to him, and her presence and statement were guarantees that the whole party should be received with due attention. Though the visitors were something of a puzzle to him they had nothing to complain of in regard to the supper that was set before them, or the rooms to which they were escorted.

Arden received everything in the line of attention with silent acquiescence. He was evidently accustomed to Mexican hospitality; and took the high-sounding protestations of the *major domo* for what they were worth. When he went to his room for the night he did not appear to be altogether satisfied, for he examined the apartment carefully as soon as he was left alone, and tried the door and windows, considering how they lay with reference to the outside world. After that he retired with his belt of arms handy, and one revolver especially ready to his hand, in case he should be awakened and have sudden need of it.

After that much of precaution he was ready for slumber, and went off through the gate of dreams without any long delay. He must have slept for several hours. Then he was aroused by a slight tapping at the window.

At the sound he opened his eyes, but did not move. In any emergency he seldom did until he saw what was the matter, and was ready to act. He was rather disgusted, to be sure, that any one could have approached near enough un-

perceived to do the rapping. He usually could detect a prowler as soon as he came in his neighborhood. Fatigue and reaction probably accounted for it.

The tapping was very faint, and after an interval of silence he heard it again. Still returning no answer the party outside added the music of his voice.

"Say, sport, in there! If you promise not to shoot I'll come in and let you have the news. But blast if I move till you show your hand. I've seen you before, and you shoot rather better when ye'r' asleep than when yer eyes are wide open. An' of yer pulls on a man it's sure death, either way. I'm a friend, an' kin give yer a wrinkle that mebbe you would like ter know."

It was the lad, Harry, who was speaking; and he was in earnest. Arden recognized his tones, and did not hesitate longer.

"Come in, old man. I've seen lots of boys of your bigness, but I was thinking when I saw your face, that there was something familiar about it. What a lad of your style wants down in this heaven-forsaken country is a puzzler, but I suppose you know your own business. Speak up! It's all right. What's the matter?"

"I dunno what's the matter; but I got a purty clear idea ov what may be ef you don't keep an eye open. There's a feller turned up, an' frum what he says he must be a bloody detective. He's a-lookin' fur ye, tho' he don't seem ter be in much ov a hurry ter find yer. Ef ther Don hed bin hyer he might hev bin gittin' in his work a'ready. Ef yer wants ter hear more, hurry inter yer clothes, an' I'll give yer ther pints. No very much hev I on hand, but what ther' are o'rt ter be a eye-opener."

It was Billy Button to whom the boy referred. Of course Don Silvio had not left him in the wretched plight in which he found him, great as was his haste. He cut loose the cords, gave him directions to the ranch, and promised to listen when he had more leisure to the story that Billy was anxious to tell. Then the Don hurried on in quest of Raquel. Had the name of Saphireinstein been mentioned it might have awakened his curiosity more, but he knew little about Captain Flash, and cared less.

Once free, and Button was in no haste. He watched the Don dash away; he stretched his limbs; he threw himself down at his ease, and considered the facts of the case; he speculated on his best course of action.

"In luck again," he murmured. "I thought I was sure to lie there all night, and here I am on foot and the very opening I would have wished for. I begin to think I may be in time. If they all come through together there will be something of a surprise at the ranch. Billy Button will make his point yet. From what the Don said they have not arrived, and I half think it would be better if I could hold out until they get there. They must be somewhere near. If it wasn't for the rascals that triced me up I would think of hauling off for a little, and going into camp in the mountains. But with such neighbors that is not to be thought of. On my soul, I believe that they are coming now. I will keep out of sight, at any rate, and see what they are driving at."

His eyesight did not deceive him. From his hiding-place he watched the little band that came slowly into sight. He noted that the Don was not with it, and speculated on the chance of being able to get his ear first.

"I must caution him any way; and there is a chance that he will give me his help. If he returns this way I can put him on his guard before he sees them. Better to wait for the Don than to go on to the ranch and be seen by them. The old fool is so besotted that warning is thrown away on him; and it begins to look as though the girl was infatuated with one or the other of the men. Confound it! It would be just my luck if they give up the idea of the coup, and one or the other went in for the daughter. More likely, though, that they are waiting until he gets the cold cash for his diamonds, so that they will have no trouble about the wealth when they once gather it in. Or else, they have an eye to coin and diamonds; and the Don is in as much danger as the Jew. It is a fortune anyhow; and there are plenty of crooks, if they knew the chance, would follow him across the continent. My time is after the stroke has been made. That's the ideal! Keep an eye open until there is something worth fighting for; and then gather in wealth and glory at the same time. It ought to be worth ten thousand to recover the gems. Yet I must give all concerned a warning. It was what they sent me here—or to the Flat—to do; and the job would not be complete if I did not say something to Silvio when he is in danger also. Positively, I must go to the ranch—but I must look out for my own interests, all the time."

After this connected fashion ran the thoughts of the lurker, and he allowed the party to pass on out of sight before he made a movement to follow.

In this way it was long after dark when he approached the hacienda, and he might have had trouble enough about getting within its walls if he had not been so unfortunate as to meet one of the house servants, to whom he

stated that he had important and immediate business with Don Silvio.

The Don had not returned, but his substitute was still awake. Harry was awake also. Just what he was doing to catch sight of the disguised detective the little rascal never explained; but he heard a preliminary talk that convinced him that the saying of this man would be of interest to the sport, to whom he had taken a great liking on sight. When he understood that more would be said, by and by, when Button had somewhat refreshed his inner man, he stole away to warn Arden that there was some sort of a plot afoot against him.

Of course the sport listened to the report of the youngster. He appeared interested, but not by any means violently agitated.

"Thanks, kindly, little man, but I don't think I'll go to the trouble of drawing on my boots to listen to any yarn that the gentleman you speak of is going to tell. He is 'way off his base anyhow; and has more wind than action. There is a heap of amusement in watching his little game, and I don't mind saying that I do feel an interest in knowing how it progresses. Give me the news when you have any and I won't forget you; but he is not the dangerous man of the tea-party. If you live long enough you will find that out."

"But, see hyer! Ef they take a noshun ter slaughter yer, kin you say how ther fun comes in? Honest injun! I wouldn't wonder ef they give yer a call ter-night. An' on these yere ranches they ain't pertick'ler what they do, s'long ez they want ter do it."

"Let them call, sonny. They will find me at home. Now, run on; and don't risk your brains again, tapping around my couch. If a man had done it I would have stood him on his head, and I might make a mistake and do it anyhow if I was bothered once too often."

"All right! I'll go back and work ther case up on me own hook. I'll see yer in ther mornin'—ef ye'r' still ter be seen; an' bet yer, ther' will be su'thin' ter tell. I'm yer solid frien' from 'way back, yer understand, an' yer can't bluff me off when I once no'shun ter freeze ter a party. So long; an' sleep with one eye open."

The youngster glided away, leaving Arden to return to his slumbers. He turned his steps back in the direction of the room in which the conversation had taken place between the *major domo* and the detective, hoping that he could hear something more in regard to the plot against the Jew.

He did succeed in catching a few words, but they added little to the information he already possessed; and in addition he came very near being detected. The detective had already had his say, and did not intend to do more than give a warning as a foundation for the request to have watched the visitors, whom he knew to be in the building. Deciding that there was nothing more to be learned Harry went to the door of the room occupied by Miss Hatton, and curled himself up there in a little ball. He was used to sleeping in all sorts of queer places, and by the time that he had his eyes closed he was also asleep.

CHAPTER XX.

TOMASSO GROWS EXCITED.

RAQUEL did not confide to her lover the destiny predicted for her by Brigada, nor did she feel called upon to give him much information about the interview; but on the way home she succeeded in convincing him that she was the most bewitching woman in the world, and that he had been altogether mistaken if he thought that she had ever ceased to care for him. After the first few moments the ride was all the sweeter for the intentional misunderstanding, and by the time they had reached the house of Espigador, they were once more, for the time at least, on the best of terms.

Although the hour was late, and Mauricio had been feeling some vague uneasiness in regard to the absence of the senorita, he was not at all surprised to see them come together. He went to meet them with the smile on his face that he had for his daughter and a few of his friends.

"Thou hast found her, then?" he said, as Silvio aided the young lady to dismount.

"I knew thou couldst not lose the trail, once started, and felt easy, though it would have been late for her to be wandering alone. I had thought the Senorita Hatton was with her. Has anything happened?"

"Much seems to have happened, though I have had but scant share in it. We left that young lady miles away, but it was in good company, and doubt not that by this time she is safely enough at my hacienda. Raquel was willful, and perhaps to test her power drew me away ere I could clearly learn who my visitors might be; but if I mistake not, one of them was the Jew, Saphireinstein, that was to visit these regions. As Raquel has it, his party had been attacked by brigands, and there was some slaughter, and bloodshed. I stopped not to hear his version; and we have had too much else to talk of as we came along to spend much time over the details. Question her if thou wouldst hear more of it. I only know that there is a man with him who looks as though he could hold his own wherever he might be; and that there was a handsome

senorita, who might have been his daughter and who seemed not to be affrighted at the prospect of danger. I have sent them on to the hacienda, and fear that my stay here must be short, since I should be there to do the honors of the house.

Raquel flitted past them as Silvio began speaking, so that there was no need of the warning "hush!" that Espigador gave. She heard nothing of this; and if she had there was nothing in it that could have awakened her suspicions, though she might not altogether have relished hearing the tribute to Rebecca's beauty. There was more than a spice of jealousy in her disposition, though so far there had been but scant opportunity for it to be drawn out.

Mauricio linked his arm through that of Silvio, and drew him away.

"Then he comes not alone? Foolish man. Does he not know the danger of bringing with him companions? One man may pass unnoticed; but two or three, traveling together by round-about ways, would awaken the suspicions of the most innocent. And thou sayest that they had fallen in with the outlaws. Strange that the men of the mountains could sweep in vain. How was it?"

"Ask me not—talk of these things to Raquel. It were better for me to know nothing of them. But rest assured that the Jew knew what he was about when he chose his companion. Such an eye! When he wills, it can read a man through. I had sooner that it had never fallen upon Raquel. I was willing that she should hurry away from the reach of its spell. Beware of the American! If he routed Tomasso and his host, that may be but the beginning of the danger. He looketh like one used to playing dangerous games, and winning always. By this time the men are under my roof, and have eaten of my salt. What next?"

It was not a question for information's sake, but a moody, brooding exclamation. Clearly, Silvio was not altogether satisfied with the prospect before him.

"Be thyself. Ask no questions, but carry out to the letter thy offer to the Jew. Thou hast done all that thou promised, and made Espigador thy friend. For the rest, he will see that thou shalt suffer no loss, and will ask thy aid no further. Only, close thine eyes and be quiet if I and my friends go by without speaking. We will have no need of thee."

"But his daughter! Had I known that he had one, and would bring her on such a fool's trip, I would sooner have gone a thousand miles to meet him. What is to become of her?"

"Tell not thy interest in her to my daughter. I can allow for thy softness of heart, but I doubt if she would. It might make her fate the worse. Rest easy. If he brings such a man with him as thou hast tried to describe he will no doubt look after the girl first of all. Leave it to him if thou knowest when thou art well off. As thy absence is accounted for, better for thee to stay here to-night. I care not to leave Raquel alone; and after the news that thou hast brought I must go to learn more. To-morrow will be time enough for thee to look at his diamonds; and never fear that he will not wait for thee."

"Have it as thou wilt. Thou hast my word to help thee in this thing; though I did not think to do it so blindly. Thy daughter must never know the price at which thou has sold her. I will see her, and if she asks me to tarry, be sure that I will linger; though I fancy that she was kinder before her father was quite so freely consenting. See to it that after I have sold myself the price is not wanting."

"What wild notion of mine is this?"

"Say nothing more. I am in no good humor for reasoning, and why shouldst thou and I quarrel? I will seek Raquel."

Espigador did not seek to detain him. Indeed, saw him go with a smile that had as much of mirth in it as he generally allowed to be expressed in his saturnine face.

"I thought the boy would grumble before his task was over. He takes not kindly to it; but what would he not do for Raquel? Pity that he could not have learned more of the Jew, and the accursed American. Why came the latter? Does Moses suspect the trap? If he does, it is now too late to escape it, even if Tomasso hath failed. Vengeance will I have, even if I have to shoot him down in the presence of his host! I have waited so long, so long! But it is time I was on the way to meet Tomasso. The villain hath not managed well. Nothing short of a bungle could have allowed them to slip away. He should have let me know that he was coming, and who was in his train. I would have warned him to run no risks with such men. Better to have shot first, and parleyed afterwards. Evil fortune would it be to find Tomasso badly wounded. I will need the villain and his men to-morrow. If he be not at the meeting-place, I will seek for him in the mountains. Brigada can say where it is most likely that he can be found. And it will be best to go with eyes well open. After such a repulse they will no doubt be none too friendly. Tomasso is a snake at best. I trust him not."

The Don left Silvio to make his excuses to his daughter. He did not care to see either of them

again until he had seen the outlaw; and went off quietly and alone.

Tomasso was not dead; nor was he even badly wounded. The sharp-shooting American had not altogether wasted the shot when he dropped his revolver in line with the chief of the bandits; but, unfortunately, he could only have a glimpse of the fellow, and the bullet sped by guess had not reached a vital spot. The Mexican made his appearance at the recognized trysting-place with a handkerchief bound around his forehead. There were spots of blood on his clothing, and he looked weak but vicious.

"This then," he growled, "is the reward for my aid. Didst thou not say the work was so easy that a child might do it? Didst thou not guarantee that there would be no resistance; and that I should receive large payment from thee if I found his pockets empty of coin? Large! It would take all the coin thou hast from one end of the year to the other to make up for these wounds alone, to say nothing of the poor fellows in worse plight than I. I am come for some of that coin so freely promised. Death and wounds have been busy at work, and it will need all thou canst give me to pay the patcher of bodies whom we must send for. Be thy purse so slender as the truth in thy promises, then it will go hard with thee."

Tomasso spoke fiercely. It was not hard to see that he imagined he had been foully treated; and that he was inclined very strongly to resent it.

The Don understood his mood, and knew how to meet it.

He held out his hand, and the gold-pieces in it clinked melodiously.

"Here is thy earnest money. Espigador never forgets a promise. How could I foretell that he was to fall in with this American, or that one man was to beat off a dozen? Better luck next time; and as thou art living, and hast thy pockets well-lined with gold, what hast thou to complain of? Come, let me hear the particulars. I would fain hear how he worsted thee and thy gang."

The words of Espigador were almost overlooked at the sight of the gold. Tomasso loved gold, and could eat humble-pie to get it any day in the year. He could even tell the truth—when he found a lie would not do as well to obtain it. He put the coin in his pocket, along with his pride, and moderated his vehemence at once.

"No worsting was there. Had it come to a fair fight there would not have been the smallest sort of grease left of the travelers; but when he shot two or three of the men the rest ran away. After that the accursed American had it all his own way."

In spite of himself Espigador laughed. Tomasso was in such earnest, and did not appear to understand the showing that his gang had made when it came under the revolvers of the All-around Sport. Then as quickly he smoothed out his face, and spoke in his steadiest tone.

"The American, then. Of what sort is he? Is he a partner of the Jew; or was he one of a party to whom Saphirenstein attached himself for protection? Have they gone on together; and dost thou intend to let it rest at this? Bad will it be for thy band to have met defeat from one man. What courage will they hereafter have to attack a dozen?"

"Ah, it will be no defeat when we meet again. Twice accursed, he shall die a dozen deaths! Limb from limb shall he be torn! Hot brands shall he hold in his arms! He shall soak in the brine of vengeance, and smart in every wound! Men shall remember how Tomasso treats those who defy him!"

He fairly howled out his threats, brandishing a knife, that might add a silent emphasis of his own. He stood dumfounded when a figure stepped out into the moonlight, at a few paces distance, and with hands dropped carelessly in pockets, and an unconcerned drawl, addressed him.

"You seem excited, old man. Don't let your angry passions rise, but pull yourself together and tell me the nearest way to the Batihoji Hacienda."

"Caramba!" answered the Mexican, turning toward Espigador, "it is the accursed American himself."

CHAPTER XXI.

DANGER, OR DEATH.

It was not remarkable that Tomasso should imagine he was face to face with the party who had beaten him off that afternoon. The same kind of a mistake had been made before, since it was Wheeler Wilson who was inquiring the way to the place of Silvio. It happened that he had both overheard and understood the conversation of the two, though it was the first intimation he had received that he was in the neighborhood of the travelers, or that they had been in such danger. Some men might have preferred keeping silent a while longer, to hear what plans Tomasso might have for the future; but the sport was not of that sort. He took things as he found them; and he was pretty certain that Edgar Arden was always ready for danger. What good, then, to know that this outlaw was

on the war-path? They would see him when he came anyhow.

In his own way Espigador was as much startled as the outlaw. Fortunately, as he thought, he had come to the rendezvous in such a disguise that he did not fear recognition at a future time. But taking the exclamation for truth he imagined that this American was in search of them; and if so he must have information that he had not dreamed was possessed by the other side. It could be no chance that had brought the man thither after once starting in good company for the place for which he was now inquiring.

Taking out of account the elements of sharp sight, and the luck that had always befriended him, Wheeler Wilson was in danger just then. The Don's hand made a steady motion toward the pistol at his belt. Only for the warning of Silvio he would have tried a shot then and there.

But steel was his natural weapon, and steel would not come into play just then; while he was afraid that a snap shot would fail him. He answered Tomasso nothing, and waited for the next move in the game. If this was the American he had not come there for nothing, and would sooner or later show his hand. Meantime, he might find a chance; for, of course, he never doubted that this man must be removed if the opportunity for doing it with safety presented itself.

The same idea had struck Tomasso. After the first confusion of surprise it occurred to him that perhaps there was no danger to be apprehended for the present, and he could have bit his tongue off for having betrayed his recognition. Without that the stranger might not have recognized the evidences of his own handiwork.

Wheeler Wilson was not of the kind to wait long for an answer to a question; and he had heard Tomasso's exclamation.

"You are right, my friend—and you are also wrong. I am certain now of what I only half-suspected before! I am an American; but not the particularly accused one to whom you refer. In all probability he was a sort of side-pard, so to speak, of mine, and was just as dangerous; a man whom it is unpleasant to meet when he is in a bad humor. You look as though you had seen him when he was cross as a bear. Tell the truth, if you know how, and I will accept it as an apology for your uncourteous greeting. Where was he, and who was with him? Don't be in a hurry to answer if you are not quite sure that you don't exactly remember. Any mistakes might be fatal."

"Pardon me, most illustrious one! Thy coming was a surprise; and strangers who walk late of a night in these regions are sometimes men of danger. Thou hast an honest voice, however, and I mind not to tell thee the truth, since I believe not that it will be put to wicked uses. He was in company with a man and woman, who from their faces might be of the seed of Abram. They went their way unhurt, and if I be not mistaken they are all three safe in that same place thou didst inquire for."

"Your story may be true, even if it does not altogether hang together. Now, for directions to that same hacienda. After that you can go your way. If it turns out that you have told the truth, well and good. Otherwise—you can expect to see me later."

There seemed to be no chance to get at this very cool young man, who talked as though the odds of two to one had no terrors for him. Tomasso gave the directions briefly, clearly and correctly, anxious to get rid of the intruder as soon as possible.

"And still it sounds like truth! All right. I am off. Good-night and pleasant dreams."

For a moment the two listened to his steady step as he went his way. It seemed as though he was at their mercy, for he never once looked backward; but they made no movement until he was out of sight. Then Espigador leaned forward and whispered into the ear of his companion:

"Another dangerous man, and he must never be allowed to enter that house alive. Wilt thou stand by me? It will not be hard to outpace him and lay an ambush somewhere on the road, from which we can shoot without being seen."

"I am with thee, but if he keeps up that pace hard would it be to overtake him. Listen!"

The sport was no longer on foot. They heard the sounds made by the feet of his steed, and knew that the scheme of the Don was impracticable.

"Was there ever such luck as this?" muttered the bandit, as the sound waxed fainter. "A dozen times I found my finger itching to slay, and yet it never tightened. Why was it? Tomasso is no coward. To-morrow, to-morrow! I will slay them both!"

"Tomasso, I fear thou art much of a boaster, after all; yet I would give a thousand silver dollars to have it proved that it was not so. It is hard to tell thee what of the future until one knows that thou wilt make thy word good. If thou canst do that, come to me at once. I can give thee no more of my time to-night, since I have a hard ride before me. It is too late for us to retreat, and remember that we are working

together for a heavy stake. Be faithful and the wealth will be thine."

"To say nothing of vengeance. Never fear that I will fail thee. I wronged thee when I doubted thee. I go back now to look after the band. Then I set myself on the trail of this man, or of the two, if two there be. Thou shalt find Tomasso no braggart, but a very demon on the trail of those he hates."

"Vengeance is good; but forget not thy original contract. Deliver into my hands the Jew. That, first of all. It is lest these men hinder that I care to see them removed. Otherwise they are nothing to me."

"Into thy hand shall he be placed—he and all of his train. Work thy will on them then, so it is a wicked one. If there be no other way, an army will I raise, and besiege the ranch. Oh, I have a thousand ways! Farewell!"

So full was the outlaw of his plans that he cared not for further talk with Mauricio, and they separated in haste, Tomasso going toward the mountains, while Espigador turned toward the hacienda of Silvio.

The Don made haste slowly. The American was somewhere ahead of him, and he had no desire to stumble over him, even in the dark. He wished to approach the building unseen, unless it was by the man who was devoted to his interests. True, the American had quite a start, but the ground was strange, and he might be delayed on the way. When, however, he was still a mile away from the hacienda buildings he halted suddenly in dismay, uncertain whether it was safe for him to go on, and wishing most heartily that at the present moment his disguise was anywhere else but on his back. As a stranger in such a garb, he was open to suspicion, while, as Espigador, he would be welcome. There was a broad glare in the sky, and in the midst of it, seemingly raised up until they appeared to be standing in the air, were the dark outlines of Don Silvio's dwelling.

Wheeler Wilson was looking at the same sight, but from a standpoint that was a great deal nearer. He saw the first burst of flame, as it came leaping out from an open window, and he put spurs to his horse, riding in reckless haste over the fragment of a mile that separated him from the scene.

When he first saw the flames there was nothing to indicate that the inmates of the house were awake to their danger—nor were they. By the time he was under a hundred yards away they came trooping out, some in silence, and some with cries that were certainly loud enough to awaken any unfortunate who might still slumber.

From the moment the flames once got a hold on the woodwork the place was doomed. Everything was dry as tinder, and would burn like it. There was no time to waste, for, though the edifice was low, and the windows almost to the ground, so that escape seemed easy, if not certain, the fire was so hot, and its spread so rapid, that it was death to be caught.

Wilson came in haste, but he was cool enough to cast a glance along the line of faces that were lit up by the glare, in search of the one in which he felt an interest.

It was not there; but Saphirenstein's was. Moses came flying out of a window, along with a huge cloud of dark smoke. He looked thoroughly bewildered, or else not more than half-awake. And, as it happened, the sport was the first man he met.

"Mine daughter! Coodness craycious! Oh, mine daughter!"

She exclaimed as he sprung at the sport, and seized one of his hands between both of his own.

"Steady, old man! Keep your head, and don't waste time. Whereabouts is she? Point out her window."

"She was asleep, in dere," he answered, pointing directly at the window by which he had just emerged.

"She could not me hear. Dree dousand tollars—"

Fortunately for his peace of mind the extravagant offer was not completed. When he had got thus far the sport broke away, and bounded toward the house, which was now but little else save a fiery furnace.

CHAPTER XXII.

MORE THAN THE SPORT BARGAINED FOR; AND THE SMALL BOY CHIPS IN.

It took desperate bravery to face the wave of flame that came swooping out of the open window as Wheeler Wilson bounded toward it. What was beyond he could not see, and it looked very much as though he was throwing himself to certain death. With no better guide than the few frenzied words of the Jew it was not very likely that he would succeed in finding Rebecca, yet he set his teeth hard, and held his breath, as he swung himself through the open window-frame, calling the name of the young lady as he went.

There was no answer, but he found himself in the midst of the blackest of smokes, and realized in an instant that he could not remain there any great length of time, or search for the young lady with the faintest prospect of success.

"Too hot for health," he muttered; "and black as Tartarus. This seems like a finisher. Rebecca! Miss Saphirestein!"

He tried to call her name aloud, but the roaring of the flames drowned his voice. If the young lady had been at the other side of the room she could not have heard him.

He tumbled blindly forward, his arms out stretched, his fingers clasp at whatever might be within reach, though it was instinct rather than will that caused him to do so.

His hand swept over a bed against which he had stumbled. It found no human figure, but it closed on some object, he knew not what.

The fingers remained closed, though he instantly turned away. He no longer knew that he was searching for Rebecca. He did not even look for an avenue of escape. He did not give up hope only because hope was an article that he never indulged in. If it had been possible for him to have felt it he would have been full of fear, since the end began to seem certain and nigh.

Then there came a sudden and a blessed relief. He had made his way clear across the building, and was at a window that looked out into the court.

It did not appear to be the safest of places, but it was heaven compared with where he was, and he gave a great cry of relief as he rolled out into air that was at least a little fresher than that he had been trying not to breathe.

The patio was full of smoke, and at first Wilson thought he had it all to himself. Then, as he staggered away toward the center of the open space, his hand was caught by another, a great deal softer and warmer than his own.

"I think I know that voice. Is it you, Mr. Wilson?"

It was Rebecca herself, who had made her way thither, she knew not how, and was uncertain which way now to turn.

The sport held on to the hand, though he did not speak at once. In fact, he could not. It had been as near a race with death as he had ever run, and it was by no means certain that it was won, even yet. He was gasping, choking, strangling—but every second feeling better. In a moment or so he had recovered his senses sufficiently to throw an arm around the waist of the young lady, and follow it up with a reassuring word or so.

"Ah, you are safe! It is more than I hoped for a moment ago, when I was calling your name in that furnace. I knew you must be near, and I could only hope that we would not die apart if we were both doomed. There is nothing worse here than the smoke, unless the fire has spread faster than I can conceive of its doing. Lean on me. Now that I have you with me I will be myself in a twinkling. The blaze is behind us—safety must be in front, though the wind is driving the flames toward us. Come!"

He hurried her away without waiting for an answer. He did not know how much of truth he was telling her, but he hoped that they would find the way open. The wind was carrying great sparks over their heads, and through the smoke the glare showed brighter every second. Another voice chimed in, just as they began to move forward—a voice which neither of them recognized, though it belonged to Raquel's page.

"Hello, sport! Here you are! Good for you! Ef I hedn't slep' with both eyes wide open, my mother's darlin' would hev bin in thar now. This way! I took a good look 'round ther shanty afore I bunked in, an' I reckon I kin find ther way outen ther trap—but wouldn't I like ter know who war ther fire-bug ez set ther thing a-goin'? Hyer we be. I'll scramble in, an' you kin h'iste up ther divinity."

Rattling on this way, the boy had led them to a window opening out on the opposite side of the court, and in another moment, under his guidance, they were out again in the open air and in safety. It was then that Rebecca gasped:

"My father—what of him? I had forgotten. He was a sound sleeper, and if some one did not arouse him in time he is lost."

"Rest easy about him. You will find him safe enough on the other side of the house, and concerned only for you. Had it not been for his directions I would never have been able to find you. We will be with him in a moment, for he will not be likely to leave the vicinity of the window through which he did, and you should have come. And as for this boy—became when he was wanted, which is what boys are not usually in the habit of doing, and I will see him later. What in the name of Heaven is he doing here I cannot imagine, unless he was sent expressly to be on the ground for our benefit when he was needed. Don't talk now, youngster. We have no time for chin-music, although we are gratified all the same."

Don Silvio's residence was not a small one, and there were a good many people under his roof when the fire broke out. Besides that there were a number of small buildings surrounding the main one, or near to it, occupied by his retainers or employees. With all these people on hand there was quite a crowd about the doomed ranch, and every one the three met on the way was wildly excited. It would have been little worth while to ask any questions. After

quite a journey they reached the opposite side of the building. Moses was there. Indeed, it seemed to be a narrow thing that they found him, for three men were holding him while he was making frantic efforts to rush into the vortex of flame which was now rolling up from the apartment he had but lately occupied.

"Stand here a moment," the sport hastily ordered, dropping the arm of his charge. "I will speak to him and draw him out of the crowd. It will not take long to relieve his mind."

He edged in between two of the men who were doing their best to restrain the excited man, and caught Saphirestein firmly by the elbow, drawing his head over with his other hand, while he whispered in his ear:

"Rest easy, old man; I have good news for you. Your daughter is safe and unharmed. Come with me. She is waiting for you."

The quiet manner of the sport had its effect. Moses ceased to struggle and listened in a sullen way.

Then he started afresh: but this time for Wheeler Wilson's sole benefit.

He broke away from the men altogether and made a dive for the sport's neck. As Wilson stepped quickly back he saved himself from the clutch of the Jew, but the latter followed him up:

"Dake me do mine daughter. Ef she have not got dem I am a ruined man! It ish mine diamonds dot vos missing now. I dook der wrong pox. Fool dot I vos! Vot coodt vos der girl midout der wealth. Ve might as vell have stayed in dere, along midt dem, and all go oup togedder."

"Hello! That's a bad break, sure enough; but, we are worth half a dozen dead folks yet, and maybe they will turn up, after all. You can see her, anyhow. Perhaps she may know something about them. But it begins to look just a trifle suspicious. All the world seemed to know what a valuable cargo you had with you; and perhaps the fellow that lighted this fire knew how to take advantage of it. Don't give it up so. Better to have them in a thief's pocket than in there."

Wilson gave a jerk of his thumb in the direction of the blazing building, and then drew the man away. He did not care to have more said about the matter in the presence of the Mexicans, who did not seem to understand what they were talking about, though they listened with every appearance of intense curiosity. The conversation was more interesting than the fire.

Rebecca was waiting anxiously. She threw her arms around her father's neck, and sobbed audibly, without saying a word.

Moses did not gush over the demonstration. He whispered hastily in her ear, and when there was no answer he actually caught hold of her shoulders and tried to shake her. He might have kept on trying until he succeeded if the sport had not been within supporting distance of the party, and interfered with a hand that was not by any means a light one.

"Steady, old man. Don't forget you are dealing with a lady, whether she is your daughter or not. Speak a little gently, or else address your observations to me."

"Forkive me, oh, mine friendt, for I am a ruined man. Verily, der clory has departed."

And Saphirestein wrung his hands for a moment before he burst into tears.

"Leave me with him, pray," requested Rebecca, recovering her calmness at the sight of her father's overwhelming grief. "He will be himself in a short time. He would not show this weakness were he not almost wearied to death with travel and anxiety. Do not fear for me. I can comfort him as none other can do. Surely he needs me. Go! I will see you by and by; and so will he. I know how deep will be his thankfulness when he understands how much he is indebted to you. I am not forgetful; but he and I must be alone."

She put her hand in that of Wilson's long enough for him to feel its warm pressure; then she pushed him gently back. He could not argue with her in such a matter, so he turned away from the pair, though he had no idea of letting them get out of his sight.

Master Harry had been a silent observer, and when the sport slowly moved in the direction of the burning building he kept at his heels. When Wilson halted he came confidentially nearer, and mentioned his own conclusions after his usual positive fashion:

"Say, sport, it's quite a game this is; and it strikes me that you are playing it mighty fine. I ain't generally much on the talk but I wan't ter remark that you hev them diamonds in yer pocket, now."

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE OTHER SPORT IN THE SAME BUSINESS.

THE start of surprise that Wheeler Wilson gave was genuine. His next impulse was to thrash the boy. Ordinarily he did not pay much attention to what a youngster might say; but in this matter he did not feel as though he could take a joke, even from a lad like Harry.

Probably the youngster knew beforehand what the charge might cause in the line of personal violence, and was ready for it. Before

the sport's hand had fairly begun the involuntary motion that it made he had hopped lightly out of reach, and stood watching Wilson with a curious gaze.

"You little scoundrel! Don't you know that a whisper of that kind has stretched many an innocent neck before now? What have I ever done to you that you want to get me in trouble? If you had been a man you would have gone down before you had finished the charge; but I can't treat a boy that way; and that is what makes him so available for mischief. We will let it go this time; but if you are wise you will not try it on again."

Wilson began angrily, and ended in a friendlier tone. He remembered that the boy had but lately helped him; and what was more important still, had helped Rebecca at the same time.

By the time he had finished Harry had his measure; or at least he thought he had it. He sidled up in the most confidential manner possible, and spoke but little above a whisper:

"You are all wrong, sport. What I said was only betwixt you an' me. Ef ther' hed bin ary soul around d'yer think I would 'a' give yer away? It war ther neatness ov ther job ez tickled me so I hed ter speak er bu'st. Him a-weepin' an' a-moanin' 'bout his lost diamonds; an' you a-standin' thar a-sympathizin', an' all that—an' a-holdin' them same jewels in yer hand all ther time. W'y, ef he hed bin half-thinkin' he couldn't a-helped seein' 'em—er ther lex ez holds 'em. An' you drops 'em in yer pocket, same ez ef it war change fur a quarter, an' you wuth a million. How's that, sport? Ain't it a true bill?"

"Ef? What's that you are saying?" asked Wilson, for about the second time in his life beginning to feel bewildered.

He saw a glimmering of method in the youngster's madness. A hazy recollection came to him of dropping something in his pocket just after that same abstracted style which Harry described. What was it?

"So yer thinks a innercent man might git his neck stretched ef the right party got on ter what he war kerryin' in his left-hand coat pocket. I'll swear it ain't all derringers. That's ther side I kerry mine on, but you hev su'thin' else. Don't worry! I kin be dumb ez a clam—an' I don't frequently say more. It's jest betwixt you an' me. I'm a floatin' pershun ov popurlashun; an' not altergether strict on me morals. Ez long ez you don't interfere with ther young lady ez you saw first under me escort I hev nothin' ter say. It's not my idear ov a perfesh; but ef you kin make it pay, well an' good. I say nothin' ter outsiders, an' wa hev ther joke ter ourselves."

Wheeler Wilson's hand was on that self-same article that he had dropped into his pocket. It was not worth while to draw it out. It was there and the boy seemed to give a pretty good description of it. Perhaps it might be as well to take his word for its contents until there was a more convenient season for examination. Meantime, what did the boy know about Moses, and his diamonds, anyhow? How did it come that he had noticed the bit of abstracted play, and jumped to his conclusion so readily?

"There does seem to be something of a joke somewhere, though, so far, I swear, you have had it pretty much all to yourself. Where did you hear anything about that same box that you could recognize it so suddenly; and why should you suppose that I should be a thief? Confound you, do I look like one?"

"I've seen a heap ov ther breed in my time, an' I must say yer don't. Wouldn't hev knowed it ef I hedn't bin a-spottin' that detective man. Mebbe ef you hed come along with me when I wanted yer to, you might 'a' got on ter ther reason 'thout askin' questions. He talked purty straight about yer game; an' you'll hev ter look out fur him ef he's come through ther fire all right. I tell yer you'll be a heap sight safer ef he's a-smolderin' in there. That's fer ther one part; ez fur ther other, it ain't hard ter answer. I'm ov a observin' turn ov mind, an' when the old gent wer' a-countin' ov 'em over, I war takin' notes on him through ther winder. Ov course I wer'n't furgittin' ther jewls when I seen ther caskit ag'in. That's all ther is ov it. I'm a yewth ov decession, an' kin be trusted, ez I hev remarked afore. Say no more about it. If yer be a-goin' ter slope I'll be ez blind ez a bat, an' won't hev ary more mem'ry than ther Peerymids ov Egypt. Ef ye'r goin' ter stay hyer and play ther game out fur ther daughter, well an' good ag'in. I'm mum ez long ez yer keeps hands off ov my young lady. Oh, I'm jest dead gone on her, er I'd offer ter come in ez a pard."

"For halves, no doubt. I must say that you are the most remarkable lad it was ever my fortune to meet. But from something you have said I think you have made a slight mistake in your man. Certainly I never saw you before. At the same time I can guess about who you have stumbled across; and can understand the mystery without any more explanation. Keep quiet and it will be all the better for you. Perhaps you will open your eyes a little when you see all that is to be seen and hear all that is to be heard."

"I'm a-openin' ov 'em now," retorted Harry, staring over the shoulder of the sport. 'Pears ter be a good night fur ther rescue ov damsels. There's two ov a kind, at ther very least. Wich are wich? Blamed ef this don't git me. He looks ther wuss fur wear, but he's got there all ther same. That's right. Let her down gently, sport. Ther singed cat were better than she looked; an' I guess neither ov you hev yer bag-gidge checked fur over ther divide. There. Easy goes!"

The lad hustled forward as he spoke, and met Edgar Arden, who was hastening away from the house with a female figure cradled in his arms. He too had been through the fire, and if his step was firm and his movements decided, he was none the less, like the a legendary animal mentioned by Harry, pretty well singed.

Miss Helen Hatton was the female; and she was more frightened than hurt, though she had been having a close call. If she did not look worse than the All-around Sport it was because she had been snugly wrapped in the poncho which he had thrown around her before making his dash through the fire. As he covered his own head with it also, at the supreme moment, he had escaped with less damage than at one time he had dared to hope for.

Arden did not appear to notice the words of the boy, but he accepted the presence of the sport without question or surprise.

"Your flask, Wheeler. I came out in light marching order, and mine has gone where the woodbine twineth. The young lady has fainted, and may be seriously hurt. These old shells burn like a flash when they do start. I would as soon be on the fifth story of a St. Louis tinder-box as in one of them when it takes a notion to go off. Ah, she breathes all right, and it strikes me that her eyes are about to open. Thanks! The medicine has done its work. If I knew just where to go I think I would slip in the back-ground, and leave you to accept the thanks. I would sooner hear anything else, especially if they come with a gush. A man does such things for the pleasure there is in them; what is the use to weep over him after it is all over, and there is no more need of him? Can't you support her, while I run away?"

"Don't be so modest," answered Wilson, out of whose head all thought of the remarks he was going to make to the lad concerning the diamonds and their proper owner had flown upon the appearance of these two new actors.

"And it may be as well to wait and see how offensive those thanks are before you run away from them. I have just had a little adventure of pretty much the same kind, and I wasn't overloaded. In fact, I was cooling my heels here because I was told that I might retire by the lady I had the bliss to rescue. And it was not done very tenderly, either."

"Well, I pray that I may have the same luck. I see that consciousness is coming, and I am reasonably certain now that there is no damage done. In a moment I want to get on one side a little, where I can watch what is going on. The tinder-box didn't catch on fire of itself, and the man that started the blaze seemed to know the ropes. Pity he can't be hung before he does more mischief. Perhaps he will be along with a gang, to take advantage of the mess. There, miss, you are safe, sound, and out of danger. If you can tell me who to hunt for I will try and look after your friends. And here is your boy, who can perhaps do more for you than I can. He will tell you how things have gone. Really, I must be looking after the interests of my employer. If he had happened to be caught in that blaze, and I not around, he will never forgive me."

Of course the last of this was addressed to Miss Helen, who had opened her eyes and was looking around, more in bewilderment than in pain. The flames had done her no harm, after all.

As she knew already in whose arms she was resting she gave no start at the sound of his voice, but she looked up at him in a way that was really more reproachful than she meant. After the service that Edgar Arden had done her she really thought that he might at least have given her time to express her thanks. Then she drew herself away, tottering a little, but showing that she could stand alone.

"Go, by all means, if your time is so important. I will thank you at another time. Give me your hand, Harry. I am glad I have found you. This has been a terrible affair. Do you know what has become of the other travelers—the man and his daughter? Are they saved?"

"Not ez terrible ez it mou't hev bin: an' ther' may be wuss a-comin'. Abraham is right side up; an' his daughter are tryin' ter comfort him 'cause ther other sport saved her 'stead ov his luggage. Kin take yer round to 'em ef yer say so. They ain't fur off. Ef yer turns yer opticks in yonder d'reeshun you kin see a bent an' wrinkled old man, 'tended by a lovely maiden. Them are those. What else kin I do?"

"Nothing, save to stay with me. We will not detain this gentleman. Perhaps there are others who need his services; and, thank heaven! I need burden him no more. But had he not come when he did I would have been dead now."

She shivered as she spoke; and Arden knew

well enough that she said only the truth. Yet he simply bowed gravely and turned away. In the presence of a handsome woman he was always modest; and perhaps he thought it would be all the better for her not to have an opportunity just then to say anything more about the scenes through which they had passed. She might faint again; or go off into hysterics, which would be worse. As he stepped away Wilson went with him.

"Say, sport, you gave me an idea about the conflagration. After the fire there may be a fight. Of course, one would suppose that the parties would be promptly on hand, to take advantage of the confusion; but there may have been some reason why they missed connection, and it's a fair thing to expect them along in the next train. Eyes open now, and pistols ready."

"Yes," answered Arden, holding up his hand as he stopped to listen to the sounds of a wild gallop.

"And it's almost an even thing that I hear them coming now."

CHAPTER XXIV.

A RECOGNITION AND A REVELATION.

WHILE Espigador was still hesitating what course to pursue he heard some one approaching at a hard gallop. As it was only one horseman he held his ground; but it was with a weapon in his hand. He did not intend to be trifled with, nor would he run many chances of a report starting that he had been loitering around shortly after the fire broke out.

Fortunately for both of them the Don recognized the horseman as Silvio; and though he was surprised to see him there it relieved his mind. The young man was too deeply committed to his interest already to fear to trust him with the secret of his disguise; and under the protection of the owner he could approach the burning buildings without fear of being called upon to give an account of himself. Indeed, he hastily decided to make some changes in his costume, and then let events decide whether or not he should remain incognito.

Silvio had eyes only for the ranch, and would have passed the Don without notice had not the latter challenged him. He recognized the voice of Espigador, however; and shouted to him, without drawing rein:

"In Heaven's name, what is it that has happened? Is this some of thy work? There are others besides the Jew within my walls, and I must see that they have not all burned together. Come on! I stop not now until I reach the ranch."

A thrust of the spur sent Mauricio's horse forward to the side of Silvio.

"Foolish boy! Why hast thou broken thy word and come hither? What is there for thee to do that could not have been better done by daylight, and to-morrow? If there be any burned they are past praying for. If they are living they have already made their escape. The building is beyond saving; and nothing that thou canst do will make thee a peso the richer, whilst thy presence now may cause question. Ask me not who started the fire. It was done by no order of mine, since Espigador must see the blow when it was struck, and if Saphireinstein has perished there, revenge has lost all its sweetness, and my loss a thousand-fold beyond thine. Since thou art here, ride on, and I will go with thee. I must know how it has turned out, and what is left for me to hope for."

"Yet thou art here?" said Silvio, suspiciously.

"And so art thou. What matter for that? I have been no further, and it was only chance that brought my steps so near thy home. Explain thyself."

"I am not thy prisoner; nor yet thy bond-slave," retorted Silvio, fiercely.

"No, but as a friend thou wert in charge of all that I had. I left thee there, under promise, as I supposed. If harm comes to Raquel, or she resents the affront, thine be the fault."

"What harm can come to her? She has seen the flames by this time; perhaps, were I still lingering there, she would be the more surprised. Let it go at that. I could not rest, and I galloped homeward. What else would you have? Call me to account in the morning if it suit thee but I have other duties for the night."

On foot, and face to face, such words might have led to something stronger still. Riding side by side, shouting them out, the two men were all the time conscious that their first desire must be to see what was between the flaming walls, that were now not far away. For the time being they hated each other most cordially, yet kept the peace. Before long they must know the worst, and then would be time for further explanation. So they kept on, and soon saw the flitting figures without the flames, and rode straight toward the spot where the two All-around Sports were standing.

They were in some danger, too, as they raced up; but Arden's quick eyes recognized the master of the mansion that was, and he spoke in a low tone.

"Friends they ought to be, since that is Batihoja himself. He wants to know what has been going on here while he has been gone; and I

guess it won't take him long to find out. Who the party is he has in tow I'll never tell, but he looks like bad enough for both."

"But he is a friend of yours all the same," answered Wilson, recognizing Espigador at a glance. "If my ears can hear straight, and I am not away off in the line of figuring, he is the party that is behind Tomasso, the latter being the gentleman with whom you had a streak of business this afternoon. He is not here for any good, and will bear watching. More anon."

He broke off hastily, since Silvio was near. He did not have his eye on them, however. Saphireinstein was beyond, and it was toward him that the Don had turned. By this time Rebecca had succeeded in somewhat calming her father, and the two were holding converse in broken whispers. They scarcely heard the horseman until he halted beside them and flung himself from the saddle.

"Ah, you are safe, at least. I could never have forgiven myself if anything had happened to you, under my own roof-tree. No fault of mine was it, and had I been here, no doubt this would have happened all the same; yet I sent you hither, and it is the part of a Mexican gentleman to see that his guests are guarded if he cannot be with them himself. Tell me that no great harm has been done, and grant me pardon for my churlishness."

He spoke in fairly pure English, addressing Saphireinstein, but it was Rebecca who answered:

"There is no blame anywhere. No doubt it was an accident; and next to my father, or even beyond him, you will be the sufferer. Had you been here all would no doubt have been just the same; and you could not well have done other than you did. I would not say that the freak of a woman has caused the loss of so many thousands. It was fate that did it. We will rest somewhere to-night, and to-morrow can return whence we came, no wiser, but a great deal poorer. Look to your own interest, now. We can see to ourselves, and just now my father hardly cares to speak with you. His loss is too recent."

Silvio bent over, and spoke in a low tone. "Do you mean to say that your father has lost the—has lost what he brought with him?"

"All but me."

"Prove it and I swear that he shall not be the loser after all. The guest in the house of Batihoja goes out as sound and as rich as when he entered. To-morrow I will speak with him; he shall give me the list, and he shall have his price the same as though he placed them in my hands. You hear my pledge, Saphireinstein?"

The Jew was not looking at him, nor was he listening to him. He was staring at the dark form of a man who had halted a couple of rods away. With his back toward the conflagration his features were in the shadow, and could not be seen, but perhaps that very fact gave to the outlines a more familiar look. At any rate, Moses seemed to gradually recognize them.

The figure was that of Espigador. He had not once seen Saphireinstein and his daughter; but when Silvio bent toward the female figure he had a revelation, and trusting to his disguise lingered to glare at the features of the man he so intensely hated.

He remained a little too long, though he did not imagine that Saphireinstein was standing so mute and motionless because he had just fathomed the nature of his plot, and the hands into which he was about to fall. When Mauricio silently drew back and moved away the Jew turned to Silvio. He had not heard a word the latter had spoken, and there was no gratitude in his tones.

"This then, was thy work."

In pure Spanish he dropped out his words, pointing with a trembling hand toward the flaming ranch.

"No harm have I ever done to thee, yet thou hast lured me hither, to perish, I and my daughter, in such a way as that. Be thou accursed, root and branch! I yet live—perhaps thy scheme may fall upon thy own head if the man who has taken my money for the work shall prove true to me. Thou hast missed the diamonds, since they lie in yonder pile; now if thou wouldst have my life come and take it."

He braced himself like a man who knows that deadly danger is near, and would not meet it like a coward. With one hand he drew Rebecca toward him, with the other he essayed to draw the revolver that swung at his waist. He was braver than Arden had seen him since they set out, and bolder than he had ever expected to see him. If it was the courage of despair it made no difference. Had Silvio made an aggressive movement, or could he have detected the first sign of present danger, the sport would have been at the side of his employer.

But Silvio seemed as much surprised as Rebecca, at the outbreak.

"In the name of the Most Holy Virgin, what is it thou canst mean? Again that charge. If thou hadst but listened as I spoke with thy daughter it might have been plainer to thee that I am the sole loser in yonder flame. Of the thousands it will cost me I had thought nothing—I had care only for my guests. I am no rob-

ber; and what profit would it be to me to take thy life?"

"But I saw Espigador with thee. Thou canst swear to me by the Blessed Virgin, and by all the saints, that there is no plot; but I know the cruel truth all the same. In thy hand I and mine are doomed. Come on then! There will be one less villain for the rest of the world to fight. Defend thyself! I am but Saphireinstein, the Jew, but I will die fighting, if die I must."

Rebecca listened in amazement. She had not the language at her finger ends, but she understood the full drift of what was being said. It almost seemed to her that the losses of her father had turned his head. She sidled up to him, and caught him gently by the sleeve.

"Surely, there is a mistake. It is the Don who has been the loser. Did you not hear his generous offer, just made, to recompense you for whatever loss you may have sustained? He came to see how it was with us, fearing that we might have come to harm. Listen to him. He will surely explain to you anything that you may not understand."

"Listen to the young lady," added Silvio. "Believe me, I know nothing of the cause of this fire; but am sure that it was an accident, such as could not have been foreseen. Did I think that it was kindled by an incendiary I am afraid it would go hard with the man whom I suspected. I know not yet what losses I have sustained, but I suspect that they will foot up fully as high as yours; and among them are things that cannot be replaced. Be reasonable, man. While under my roof tree you are safe."

The Don spoke with as much earnestness as though he knew nothing of Espigador and his plans, nor did he notice the allusion to his prospective father-in-law. Had he forgotten; or was the presence of Rebecca enough to make him forswear his allegiance to Mauricio? Saphireinstein looked at him doubtfully.

"It may be as thou sayest. Thou art young; and with a face that is not altogether that of a villain. But Espigador lurks in the distance; and he is thy friend. Prove that there is some spark of truth in thee and perhaps I can believe that thou art but the dupe of the vilest. For myself I ask nothing; but swear to me that thou wilt protect this child, who believes in thee, even to the peril of thy life. Then, Moses may have been duped but he will die hard."

"That much I have already promised. I could not have dreamed that you would bring your daughter on such an errand, but had I done so I would have guaranteed you her safety as freely as I do it now."

"But, swear! Swear on the crucifix! Swear by heaven and hell. Darest thou do it?"

"By any oath that you may name."

"To protect her here, and see that she is returned in safety to her friends, without thought of what may happen to me."

"I will swear. Dictate your oath."

With the change to a dialect that he was master of, Saphireinstein seemed like another man. He was no longer the German Jew, with a jargon that made one's ears ache to listen to; and his very appearance had undergone a transformation. He held up his right hand, and Silvio did the same, while an oath was dictated, and repeated, that was short but very impressive.

"And now the crucifix—the crucifix!" exclaimed Saphireinstein, as the last words of the promise were uttered.

The Don thrust his hand into his bosom and drew forth a little, ebony cross.

"It was the last gift of my mother. By her memory I swear upon it!"

Reverently his lips touched the sacred emblem.

"See then, for the sake of thy life and soul, that thy promise is kept. When we meet again thou wilt be called to strict account. Farewell!"

Then, without waiting to hear the word of protest that Silvio would have spoken, or to give a good-by to the astonished, the bewildered Rebecca, he sprang into the convenient shadows, and darted away.

CHAPTER XXV.

BILLY BUTTON AND HIS CONVOY ARE TAKEN IN.

THE two men had perhaps deemed themselves practically alone, save for the presence of Rebecca. They had spoken openly, and if it was in a low, tense tone it was more from the nature of their conversation than from fear of being overheard.

There were two witnesses of the interview, however, whose ears were sharp. The All-around Sports were just far enough away to remain unnoticed; and just near enough to take it all in. There was no call for their interference and they were learning a good deal.

The movement of Saphireinstein was a surprise, however, for which Aaron was totally unprepared. He had somewhat expected that Moses would see him about a retreat a little later on, but had thought it would be done in such a way as not to excite suspicion. There

was no use for him to follow in pursuit; and, indeed, it seemed to him that he could do his employer more good by remaining where he was, by watching the course of events. There must be something in the charges made by the Jew; and exactly what it was he wanted to learn, so that he could know what was their best course to pursue.

"Let the old fool go," he muttered, watching narrowly to see if there was any pursuit. "Wilson and I are needed here just now. I begin to think Moses never does anything without knowing what he is about. Morning will be time enough to look him up. I reckon he will not be hard to trail. He will be somewhere near, lying low."

Wheeler Wilson had about the same stock of ideas on the subject, and, in addition, had the puzzle to unravel of what he was now to do in the matter of the jewel case, which he had unwittingly snatched up in the burning building. Saphireinstein was gone, and had left in such a manner that the loss of the diamonds now appeared to be but a secondary matter. If the signs of the times were to be believed they would not be the safest articles to intrust to the keeping of the young lady, and though he had intended to hand them over at once, he began to believe that perhaps he had better retain them in his possession a little longer, until the smoke had somewhat cleared away, and he could see better what was best to be done with them. Some one was reaching after them very vigorously. If that some one could be kept in the belief that the fire had destroyed all hope of gaining them, so much the better. And as Saphireinstein had seemed to think his daughter in danger, of course the sport felt that his first duty was to her. He was wonderfully wrapped up in the handsome Rebecca.

The sports might have found trouble in following the trail of the Jew, had they tried to do so. He was as wily as a fox, and a better judge of the country than they gave him credit for being. Besides that, in spite of his looks at times, he was neither infirm nor deficient in staying qualities. He had counted on taking the Don by surprise, and that if there should be any pursuit it would not begin until he had several minutes' start.

Of those minutes he took the best advantage. Once out of sight and he doubled and twisted, never once looking behind, being all the time careful about allowing his figure to be seen against the glare of the still raging fire. In ten minutes he was nearly a mile away, and in the line where he would be the least likely to be looked for. Then he moderated his pace somewhat, felt carefully for the revolver he had thought once to use on Silvio, and finally came to a halt. He was aware that he was not entirely alone on this trail. He could hear the footsteps of a man crashing on a short distance ahead. Was he pursuer or pursued?

When he had listened a bit he heard the man blunder and fall, then give a groan, as of one who was in pain, and frightened to boot.

Moses was a little frightened himself, but he was not altogether deaf to the claims of humanity. Besides, most any company was a relief, provided he could keep the upper hand, and get rid of it if it proved finally to be too objectionable. After listening a little more, to make sure that there was no mistake about it, he went forward in the direction of the sound, and so quietly did he come that he was within a few yards of the sufferer without his presence being detected.

The man was seated on the ground, nursing one foot. By this time his groaning had subsided, and he was talking to himself at intervals, while he waited to see what damage had been done.

"It's a sprain, sure enough, but how bad is it going to be? The accursed luck—to happen at such a time! The Mexican meant all that he said, and if he once found me I would go out of the wet at the end of a rope. Dollars to dimes that he and Captain Flash are in partnership and that the Jew is lost if he stays there. He wouldn't take my warning at the Flat; and I suppose he will be just as thick-headed here, and put himself in the hands of his worst enemies. And here, I have to skulk in the underbrush on account of that confounded accident over at the ranch. How could I ever have been so clumsy? Must have been because I was extra cautious. But to think of my becoming an incendiary! I had better left my investigations alone. And meantime, if this ankle is as badly strained as it seems to be I am at the mercy of the first searching party that comes out to look for the fugitive. And after the way in which I have given myself away there is not much likelihood that the bandits will let me escape."

Saphireinstein recognized the voice as that of the detective; or the man who had posed as such, under the guise of Billy Button. He had given him the cold shoulder at the Flat; but here it was a different thing, and he approached a little nearer, though as cautiously as ever. When he spoke his voice coming so unexpectedly, sounded to the detective like an exploded cannon.

"Mine friendt, dere vos nodings put drouples undt drials in dis worldt v'en you inderfere midt odder beoble's pizziness. It seems midt me dot

it would make you dired. V'odt isht de madder now?"

At the address Button leaped to his feet without a thought of the sprain he had just been bemoaning—only to find himself confronted by a man and a big revolver. His nerves seemed to be thoroughly shaken for he did not at once recognize Saphireinstein, and was about to dash off in the same kind of a headlong flight that had already brought him to grief. But there was a naivete about the concluding question, and the way it was uttered, that made him pause and look his man over as well as he could by the uncertain light. In the silence that followed it gradually dawned upon him who the intruder was and his consternation changed to something like joy when he saw that the Jew had come to him at last. He made sure of his man, however, before committing himself.

"Who are you, and what do you mean by this nonsense? Do you know that I have a great mind to arrest you for carrying concealed weapons? That is dangerous, sir; turn the muzzle the other way while you give an account of yourself. That is better. Now, what are you doing here, this time of night? Your name, if you please?"

"Id vosh Moses Saphireinstein, v'en in de land of safety, undt der balls of beace. Der nexht man dot ashks me, id vill pe somedings else, Sbdrikes me dot id vouldt be better ash goodt for bofe doo change his name."

"Saphireinstein it is; and no doubt you remember me. I have run a heap of danger, coming out here to hunt you up. I tell you, they are looking for you high and low, and if they find you, you are no better than a dead man. The sooner we can get out of this the safer it will be for you and your property. Of course, you carry your valuables with you?"

"Dot vosh a leading question, und I vill dakes mine own dime do answer id."

"Never mind that. Silence gives consent, and you would not trust such a fortune very far out of your reach. What you want to do now is to get away from this den of thieves alive; you can settle the question of recompense afterward. It is really now or never."

"I pelieves you; but v'ot apout mine daughter?"

"Leave your daughter to take care of herself. She is safe enough. It is you they are after; and if you escape, the Don will not dare to allow any harm to be done to her, as that would prove that he was in partnership with the robbers. He wouldn't care to do that, so she will be allowed to come back safe and sound, if you can once get away from their clutches. And I am the man to see you clear."

"Eef dot sphrain ish not doo pad," slyly put in Moses.

"Sure enough. Let me see. Well, it is miraculous. I don't believe that I feel it at all. It was not as bad as I feared. I will be able to place you in safety, beyond a doubt."

"Undt you are sure dot you knows der vay?"

"I came here, and there will be less trouble in going back. I could take you through blindfolded."

Moses was pretty well aware that the meeting was purely accidental; that the detective had fled from the burning ranch because he thought that he was in personal danger; that he had accidentally been the incendiary, and was afraid that the Don would make good his words as to what he would do if that individual was caught. He had very little confidence in either the courage or the skill of the man, and did not intend to pay him anything at all for his services; but he had no hesitation about using him for the present.

"Coord't right along, den. I vos no use here do sthay. Vben dey gits droo midt der puilding dere vill pe a look outt for us."

"This way, then," said the detective, highly gratified that Moses had at last placed himself unreservedly in his hands; and he started up to lead the way.

By this time the flames in the distance had fallen to a deep glow, that came from the embers of the ruined ranch; and by this light it was not hard to direct their flight. True it was that both of the men were on foot, and that their progress must be slow; but they were hopeful that they would meet no one for the present, and that morning would find them quite a long distance from the spot. The detective had plenty of questions that he would have been glad to ask, but the first two or three met with such unsatisfying answers that the balance were kept in reserve for a more convenient season. The two plotted on for quite a while in silence.

And then, without warning, a rope suddenly dropped over Saphireinstein's shoulders, and he was jerked to the ground, while a harsh voice ordered his companion to come to a halt. As the command was accompanied with suspicious sounds that even uneducated ears would have pronounced the clicking of sundry pistol hammers, it was obeyed by Billy Button without a moment's hesitation.

"Good heavens!" he muttered; "what next? it's frying-pan to fire with me ever since I started on this unlucky trip. And just when things were running my way. I wonder if I will get out of the scrape alive."

It was a wonder that was presently supplied with a strong basis. Two or three men came forward, and first of the lot was Tomasso, the brigand.

CHAPTER XXVI.

TOMASSO'S ULTIMATUM.

It was altogether by chance that Tomasso came up in the two fugitives; but it was a chance that was very satisfactory. When he had looked them over he gave an exclamation of delight.

"It could not be better. Here is the man we left trussed up when we were in haste, and could not take him along. It was an oversight not to have cut his throat then; and Providence has given us a chance to remedy the mistake. And this is the Jew that slipped from our fingers when the Satanic American opened fire. Ah, thou art mine at last, and if thy purse is not a heavy one it will be the worse for thee. I will search thee myself, since such sly ones need thorough examination. Perhaps thou hast jewels hidden about thee. If so, try not to hide them, and least of all to swallow them. We have away of finding, that leaves the man in many pieces."

The caution was only a chance hit, but it made Mosessquirm. If this fellow should only suspect! They might dissect him on the chance when they found that he had no visible treasure.

There was nothing to do but submit; and with much expertness Tomasso turned his victim, so to speak, inside out.

There were a few coins of small value, some papers which could not be deciphered in the absence of a better light but which did not seem to be of any great value; and the revolver which was still clutched in his fingers. Fortunately it was not a self-cocking one, or it would doubtless have gone off several times—and done no damage to any one but its owner.

Mexican expletives of the most high-sounding order showed that the result was anything but satisfactory; and to the unfortunate it really seemed as if the captain was only meditating how to go about carrying his thinly-veiled threat into effect.

Of course it was a disappointment; but Tomasso had his consolation, and did not feel as desperate as he seemed.

"Worse picking, even, than thy friend; but what of it? There is a fair reward offered for thee; and all that might have been found in thy pockets would have been but so much clear gain. Wait! There are worse men than Tomasso, even if they are not called brigands. When thou art in those hands thou wilt wish thou hadst had a pretty little fortune with which to have bought thy freedom. It will then be too late. As for this carrion—take him away and hang him. He has already passed through our hands, and deserves death for twice disappointing honest men than himself."

"Don't be in a hurry!" exclaimed the detective, who had been listening attentively, and caught the gist of Tomasso's soliloquy, and understood the order thoroughly.

"I may be worth more than you think; and Saphireinstein can pay for both. Name your price; put it somewhere in the reach of an ordinary man, and perhaps we can come to terms."

"With thee there can be no terms. Say thy prayers; it will be a favor to the earth to relieve it of such a load as thou. The Jew can have until sundown to-morrow to buy himself clear. After that he dies. And for ransom we take all that he hath. The terms are easy, and even a fool could understand them. Now then, we must be moving."

"Mine friend, you have made von grandt mishdake. Dere vosh no monish in Moses Saphireinstein. He hash been robbed already, undt der best chance vould pe do let me go, undt look after der thieves. I leaves everydings behindt, in der hands of Espigador, an' eef you vos in bardnership vid him he vill be apt do sheat you der eyes outt, eef you do nod hurry do der shpot pefore he gets away mid der diamonds. I dings a great deal mid you, Misder Robber, undt vould hate do see you sheated your share out after der vay you vos vorking to get id. Efery dings else dot I have vos in my glothes, undt, id vos no use do dalk apoud ransom, or anydings else."

"Diamonds, ah! he said nothing about them," muttered Tomasso to himself, the words of the Jew having an effect.

"There may be more in this than I had thought. Espigador is a good friend and a bad enemy, but all the same he must not give me all the labor, and he take all the spoils. First to hear all these fools will tell me; and then to see the Don. He must divide fairly, or Tomasso looks out for his own profit."

He looked up just in time. A couple of his men, toward whom he had turned when he was giving his orders in regard to the detective, were about to lead him away. They had their lassoes handy; and there was no doubt in their minds what they should do with them. In a moment or two more Billy Button would have been suspended.

Tomasso gave a basty signal, which stopped proceedings in that direction. He found that the reason Button had made no further plea for

mercy lay in the fact that he had been neatly gagged, and his hands tied behind him. It was very well done, and he said so; but the detective was released, and taken to one side for a bit of private conversation.

After the admissions made by the Jew it was not worth while to set up any other line of argument. The detective told the truth as he knew it; and it had considerable weight with the brigand, besides saving the detective's neck for the present.

Of course Billy said nothing more about himself than was necessary, keeping strictly to the line of Saphireinstein, and his fortunes. He asserted that Moses had been robbed; that he accused a certain Don Espigador of being present; and a moving spirit in the plan to burn the ranch, and commit the robbery in the confusion that followed. As far as he knew, the scheme had been successful.

That let Mr. Button out of the affair almost altogether; but he was totally unprepared for the next move on the carpet.

"It is well. Thou hast saved thy life for the present; and thou shalt have a chance to save it altogether. Thy tale is perhaps true; but to test it I must hear what that same Espigador says. Thou shalt take two messages to the ranch. One for him, that he meet me as I may direct; another for Silvio, that if he sends me out the American who came thither last evening he shall have the Jew in exchange. If he faileth, Saphireinstein shall hang, and I will sack the ranch, or what is left of it. These messages thou shalt take straight as I give them to thee, and if they be not so delivered I drop all else and follow thee. The man who betrays Tomasso, or fails him, roasts over a slow fire."

It was a delicate mission offered to him, but Button would have declined without any thanks if he had only dared. He had an idea that Silvio was but little less lawless than Tomasso, and that he would be about as safe in the hands of the one as of the other. But it might not be healthy to try to give an explanation of why he feared to return, and he was in a quandary when the brigand, as if divining his thoughts, continued:

"It will be best to make sure thou dost not escape, and one of my men who shoots marvelously well shall follow not far in thy rear, so that if thou shouldst turn to the right hand or the left, he will know that there is treachery afoot, and will act accordingly. He can then take on the message himself, though it would be best that it should come through thy hands."

"Very well, I will go!" said Button, desperately, seeing no chance of escape from the unpleasant duty.

"If he takes me for one of your gang and shoots me on sight there will only be one honest man the less. When am I to start?"

"Now. It lacks little of daybreak, and it will soon be light enough for them to see who comes. A moment, a little scribbling, then thou art off, and good luck go with thee. It is a fortunate thing that thou art not a better man."

By the time the credentials were ready Tomasso had added an idea to his scheme. A mounted man was detailed, who took the detective up in front of him, and started boldly off in the direction of the ranch. He had instructions to go as near to the buildings as he dared, and then send Billy in under the muzzle of his carbine.

So it happened that Button made better time going back than when he was fleeing; and was unable to see a loophole for escape. A little after sunrise he slid off of the horse, and without any ceremony of leave-taking swaggered toward the little group of men he saw standing near the still smoking pile of embers.

Of course the main building was a perfect wreck; but there were smaller buildings, near by, which had so far escaped. In them was stored whatever had been saved from the flames; and in them the late inmates of the ranch had passed the remainder of the night, after seeing that nothing could be done by strolling around the ruins.

Billy Button understood Spanish fairly well, and could talk it after a fashion, if not hurried too much. He asked for Don Silvio in a tone of authority, and was taken to him without question.

Silvio was just leaving the cabin where he had been sleeping for an hour or two. He looked pale and disturbed, and for the instant did not recognize the man before him, who made a bow and then handed to him a note as he said:

"Read it, sir, read it first; and I will then explain how it came into my hands, and try to make clear anything that you do not understand. As I have not seen the contents I can only guess at them."

By that time Silvio had called to mind the man he had found trussed up in the mesquites. As he had not yet connected him with the burning of the ranch he simply wondered what could be the meaning of this. While he wondered he read.

A frown came to his face. Tomasso had managed in a few words to express his meaning quite clearly. He had the Jew, and, as he had panned out so poorly, had at first intended to hang him and be done with it. Then he found

that there was a man at the ranch he wanted more than he did Saphireinstein, and who was probably only in Silvio's way. He offered to make an exchange, and would then allow Moses and the Don a reasonable time to arrange for a ransom. The note concluded with a request that the bearer might be aided to an interview with Don Espigador, for whom he had a message of similar importance.

As Silvio looked up in wrath, Wheeler Wilson came swinging along. He, too, had taken an hour or so of sleep, and it had made him as good as new. Silvio gave him a glance, a nod, and then placed the note in his hand.

The sport ran over its contents, gave a short laugh, and without waiting for query or comment, exclaimed:

"And a very neat joke it will be on Mister Tomasso, who seems to be a mighty potentate in these regions. Accept his terms by all means. Give me five minutes, and I will be ready. And if you will just explain the arrangement to my side-pard, in case I don't find him, I don't think you and the Jew need worry about the ransom. There will be fun afloat before you can begin to count the shekels."

CHAPTER XXVII.

WHEELER WILSON GOES DOWN.

ESPIGADOR had been a third witness of the interview between Silvio and the Saphireinsteins, but he had halted too far off to hear anything that was said. He guessed at a great deal of it, and was satisfied that Moses was making an appeal to the Don to protect his daughter. When the sudden retreat was made he was thrown off the trail at the first double. By chance he found it again, just a little before Tomasso appeared on the carpet, and was a concealed spectator of the capture, and the interview which followed.

He came near advancing boldly and claiming his quarry, but restrained himself just in time. Instead, he approached cautiously, and heard enough of the conversation of the three to understand Button's mission to the ranch.

The face of the Don lengthened, but it did not take him long to make up his mind. While Tomasso was writing he was making the best of his way back. He knew just where Saphireinstein was, and he proposed to leave him there for the present. He was anxious to know what message the outlaw was sending for him; but preferred to receive it where there was no immediate danger menacing him, in case he and Tomasso might have a difference of opinion.

Espigador had been resting with the rest for some time when the messenger arrived; and he turned up just as Wheeler Wilson had made his declaration, and hurried away to find Rebecca.

At a hint from Silvio, Button delivered to him the note from the brigand, in that way cutting off the string of questions that Mauricio was ready to ask.

The latter appeared as hard to please as Silvio. He looked over the letter, and then, crushing it in his hand, sharply asked what had been done.

A few words sufficed to tell what the sport had proposed, and that Silvio was much inclined to let him have his way. As he did not suspect that Wilson was not the man wanted, it presented the nearest way out of the difficulty. Espigador shot a keen glance at him, but refrained from questions. The Don was so variable in his moods that it was hardly safe to make him a confidant. As he said nothing of what was to follow the return of the Jew, Mauricio thought it was as well to leave all such questions in abeyance.

"Do as thou wilt; but remember that the man is to be my guest when he has been found. If thou hast taken the matter in thy hands I will leave it alone, for the present. It is time, now, that I was at home. There will be questions to ask, and it will be as well that I am there to answer them. Raquel is shrewd, and she may have something to say in regard to the black-eyed beauty. So far, I could satisfy her; but it will not do for that girl to remain here too long. My daughter has little faith in the constancy of man."

Silvio could have protested, but Espigador turned away without waiting for his answer. His work was mapped out already; and he had no idea of seeking his home for the present. He supposed, of course, that the sport who had made so generous an offer, was the man who had been acting as the bodyguard of Saphireinstein; and he thought he saw a chance of getting him out of the road, and laying the onus of the operation on the shoulders of Tomasso, the outlaw. He knew nothing of the horseman who accompanied the detective, or he might not have been so ready with his scheme. He started in the direction of the Espigador Ranch, but when he had gone sufficiently far to be out of sight he altered his direction. He knew the spot at which the exchange of prisoners was to be made, and the route that led to it. If the sport was going thither, and going alone, he intended to see him on the way. He would sooner have had some one with him, but he thought that he could carry out his scheme alone. He traveled for some time, all the while drawing nearer to what he thought was the haunt of the outlaw, and finally ambushed himself carefully with a carbine over

his knee, and waited. No American should come between him and his vengeance.

Meantime Wheeler Wilson had gone to look for Rebecca. On the way he was halted by the boy who had been troubling him the night before. He was fresh as a rose after a shower, and smiled as he looked up into the face of the sport.

"Goin' on ther trail, be yer? Mebbe you wouldn't mind a side pard? Gettin' tired ov this meself. Take me along an' I'll do yer good."

"You look like the right sort of a young man, but this time I will hardly need you."

"Say, sport, are yer takin' ther diamun's along?"

The question was asked after a fashion that was calculated to inspire a burst of confidence; but it did nothing of the kind. It almost brought something else that was generally supposed to be quite foreign to the nature of the sport. He made a step toward the urchin—and then paused.

"Confound you! You will make me forget that you are a boy, if you keep that up long enough. I know nothing about any diamonds, and the less you say about them the better it will be all around. When I come back I'll tell you all about the outlaws in the mountain, and maybe bring a sample copy along for you to look at. Now, don't bother me. I am in a hurry."

"Prezactly. Mum's the word, an' I'll trust to seein' yer later. Here are my note-book. Mebbe you wouldn't mind writin' yer post-office address in it? I'll know w'ich way ter steer, an' who to tie to when I git tired ov waitin' on ther donnas. It's lots ov fun, hyer, an' not half bad grub, but it gits monotonous. So-long, ef yer goin'; an' don't furgit I'm seein' ov yer later."

"The confounded little rat! How did he come to drop onto the facts in the first place; and does he suspect that the jewels have disappeared, in the second? It might pay to call him back, and question him. But, after all, the owner is the more important. The diamonds can keep until we get Moses on his feet. After that we will begin afresh; and get as near to the bottom of this mystery as the law allows. If Silvio keeps his pledge the rest will be easy enough. But it is a puzzle where the diamonds went to. Just as well that I have said nothing about them, and that I looked into the case before I started out to see Rebecca."

He found the young lady without any trouble, since he had seen her safely stowed away in a cabin which also contained Helen Hatton. By this time the two young ladies had become somewhat acquainted, and Miss Hatton was trying to persuade the handsome Jewess to accompany her to the Espigador dwelling, for which she intended starting as soon as she could get hold of her young escort, and have their horses made ready. She tried to show that there was no use to put up with the scant accommodations here, when she could as well be in comfort, and have sympathizing friends; and that her father would be found and brought to her; or Silvio and the Don would look after her comfort and safety until something definite was known about him. No doubt the loss with which she understood he had met had temporarily unbinged his mind, but he must be far from being a ruined man.

And in that way Miss Helen, who had a really kind heart, was trying to cheer her up when Wheeler Wilson came to take his leave, and give the assurance that her father would probably be back before nightfall. As the conference was private there is no use in trying to explain all that was said, but Miss Hatton saw that Rebecca was in a more hopeful mood, and so felt less qualms of conscience about leaving her.

"If you are determined to remain I am not sure but what I should remain with you. It is the only chance I see to have Brigada's prophecy amount to anything, and I must say I never wish to refuse to give fate a chance."

That was Greek to the other young lady; but the reader knows she was thinking of Edgar Arden, and the little likelihood there was of seeing him at the ranch unless he was drawn thither to look after the interests of Rebecca. Revolving this in her mind she decided she would at least have a few words with Edgar Arden before she went, if that handsome young stranger was anywhere to be found. She went out, and saw him taking leave of Wilson, who mounted his horse and rode away.

The sport had all the necessary directions before him, and thought he could deliver himself into the hands of the bandits just as well as though he had an escort of a dozen men, and his hands were tied behind his back. He suspected that there would be a watch set for his coming but he gave no sign of uneasiness. Treachery was something to be expected, and all that he could do would be to guard against it as well as he could. He knew nothing of Espigador and his ambushade, or he might have concluded that the chances against him were more than doubled. After some rapid riding he came down into a draw, and just when he was most off his guard there was a flash, a report; and Wheeler Wilson rolled off his horse.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE BITER IS BITTEN.

WAS Wheeler Wilson dead, or badly wounded? Not a bit of it. His luck was as good as ever; and he had exceptional experience and skill in such matters. His luck it was that he saw the flash from the carbine of Espigador; and throwing his feet out of the stirrups down he went. To drop soon enough, and not too soon; to fall as though hard hit, or dying; and to lie ready for whoever appeared to take advantage of the shot—that was his skill.

He had hardly touched the ground, however, when he heard a second shot.

Although the ball did not seem to strike anywhere near him he had a sensation of disgust.

"If the fellow is not satisfied with seeing me tumble to his first shot, he must be hard to please. Confound him! Does he expect to sit off there at long range, and pepper away till I am as full of holes as a skimmer? I reckon he's been there before, and I must think about trying something else."

Thinking this way Wilson gave an almost imperceptible movement of his head, so as to get a better view of the spot where the man had been in ambush.

The man was there no longer, though the sport got a glimpse of him in the distance, beating a hasty retreat. At the same time another shot, which Wilson did not doubt was aimed at the fugitive, accelerated his speed.

It was a temptation. The sport felt like springing up and making pursuit, but he restrained himself. After all it was not certain that the party taking a hand in at the critical time was a friend, and it might be as well to leave the Don under the impression that his felon shot had done its work well. He lay still and awaited what was to come next. Perhaps the fellow who had tried his hand at Espigador might follow on after the Mexican; if he did not, but come to view the corpse, Wilson was ready for him.

Sure enough, a footstep approached; and the one who made the sound was shrewd enough to come from the rear. Would he shoot, or speak? He did the latter.

"You seem not to have struggled much, and there is no blood to be seen. Ten dollars to as many pesos that thou art neither scared nor hurt!"

"I won't take that bet, though I don't often throw off an offer to stake money. What did you chip for, stranger? Another minute and he would have been out of the bushes and the war would have begun in earnest."

Lazily the sport rolled over and rested himself on his elbow, gazing up at the bandit with a pleasant smile on his face. The fact that he was covered by the muzzle of a repeating carbine seemed to have no terrors for him.

"Had I not recognized thee at a distance, and seen that the advantage was on the other side, the war might have gone on so long as there was breath left thee to fight. And had it been another man who had thee down he would have never lived to go away. But I gave him a hint or two, and he thinks thee dead, and has left the corpse for me to rifle and bury. This way I draw double satisfaction. Since thou art dead I still hold the Jew."

Tomasso tried to be as unconcerned as the sport, but there was a hard glitter in his eyes, and had there been the sign of an offensive movement his finger would have tightened on the trigger which lay beneath it.

"All right! There is no doubt I am a valuable piece of property, and now that you have me you want to keep me in lavender and swan's down. It's a sure thing you don't want to kill me on sight, or you would have left our mutual friend to finish his work. What's the programme? Hands up, and fingers empty, I suppose."

"Lie down on thy face, with thy hands stretched well to the front. With teeth drawn thou canst walk about as it pleases, but it would be worse than the act of a bobo to trust thee too far."

"Thanks for the sop to my pride. I don't often get in such a scrape, but I know as well as the next man when the drop is on me, and would sooner take the chances of later on. But I give you fair warning that if you go back on your word, and refuse the exchange, you will find yourself, sooner or later, up to the hub in trouble. Now, clean me up as quick as you have a mind to, and then come down to business."

Still without a show of concern, the sport stretched himself out as ordered. If Tomasso wanted to drive a knife in his back he should have the chance.

The temptation to do that very thing was great, but the brigand restrained himself. First, he removed the weapons of his prisoner, as far as he could find any. Then he turned his pockets inside out with neatness and dispatch.

The booty was nothing to speak of, for Wilson was aware that in venturing into the den of the voves he would be stripped to the skin, if nothing worse happened to him. Nevertheless, he did find a few trifles that he thought worth transferring to his own pockets. Then he drew a long breath. So far he had not dreamed that this was not the man whom he had encountered

the previous day; and after the wholesome lesson he then received, Tomasso had not felt absolutely safe until he had the American disarmed. When he had gone over his possessions, and reduced the pair of revolvers to his keeping, he had no more fear, because he intended to shoot at the first offensive movement, whether he thought it would or would not amount to anything.

"Thou art the coolest man I have seen for many a day; or else thou hast no knowledge of the danger thou art in. Not one man in a thousand would have had Tomasso's fingers at his back, and hate in his heart, without a shiver. It makes one sad to think that thou must die. Rise up, however. It would be no great pleasure to kill thee now. Only remember that I give no warning to a prisoner. When he shows his heels I show my lead."

"Don't worry your dear old soul about the sight of my heels. I generally come toes first, and I come like a cyclone. There's a black cloud in the distance, and after that there is no time for other observation. I would remark that it is not far from dinner time; and I hope your hospitable board is not very distant."

The sport arose leisurely, and gave no token that he felt any humiliation at the way Tomasso had treated him. From the time this interview had begun he had suspected that the brigand was not alone, and now he was made certain. At a sharp whistle from the chief several men came briskly out of the mesquites from which he had fired at the Don. They glared at the prisoner in a way that showed they had no good blood for him; and a timid man would have been pleading for mercy on sight, if he had met them on a lonely road, and they had given him such looks. They closed in around the sport at a few words from the chief, and prepared to escort him to a place of confinement. Where it was he did not say, but Wilson hoped that Saphirstein would be found there.

"I move not in a matter until I know both sides of the question. I must speak to Espigador before I have further talk with thee. If he treats me not right I will send to Silvio, two heads in a bag instead of one. Tempt not these lambs of mine too much while I am gone, and by nightfall I may see thee again."

"It is the fortune of war," murmured the sport, as the outlaw moved off. "But the sooner you open negotiations the sooner you will be out of your misery. If you keep me waiting too long I will be apt to open up after my own fashion."

Tomasso heard but gave no answer, save a shrug of the shoulders. He thought he could trust his men to take care of that. It was time for him to seek the rendezvous appointed with Espigador, and he was anxious to see whether that worthy would be there, and what he would have to say for himself. He made some changes, that amounted to a disguise, and set out.

The point chosen for the interview was on the direct line between the two ranches, so that wherever the Don might be he would have a good excuse to get there. Had Tomasso been certain he was at the ranch of Silvio when he dispatched his messenger he might have appointed an earlier hour, and perhaps saved some complication. He proceeded leisurely, keeping a bright lookout as he went, for as yet he did not care to damage the Don. Espigador was not a popular man among his few neighbors, but no one had accused him of being a confederate or associate of outlaws.

A horseman or two appeared in the distance, but they went their way, unsuspecting of the nature of the man who was riding leisurely over the plain.

The motte was very innocent looking, as he approached it. There was nothing to indicate that there was any one within the shelter of the mass of green, and at a little distance it looked as though a horseman could hardly penetrate to its center. Still, Tomasso did not care to be rash. He approached with care, and just as he got at the edge, and turned into a narrow and almost imperceptible bridle-path, he slid from his horse, and gave the animal a light tap with his hand. The horse went on at the same gait it had been keeping, following the path as though it was accustomed to it. Tomasso warily crept into the denser shrubbery, and went forward, stooping so low that he almost crept.

After a little he drew near to the center of the motte, where there was a small opening. Peering carefully through the branches he could see a man there, who looked as though he might have started forward at hearing the horse, which still came slowly along by the winding path.

Tomasso grinned. When he met the Don he intended to hold the advantage. With his eyes fixed on the man he crept on more cautiously than ever. With his revolver at a ready he was just emerging from the bushes when the cold muzzle of a pistol was pressed into his ear, and he heard a voice at his back:

"Drop it, man, drop it! Hands up, or go over the range."

CHAPTER XXIX.

RAQUEL MEETS WITH TROUBLE ON THE ROAD.

THE evening that Silvio spent with Raquel was not an unpleasant one as it passed. The two had

several little differences, that were made up on the spot, and they separated as lovers usually do. Yet there must have been some unsatisfactory elements introduced, for afterward neither felt altogether at ease, and both remained wakeful. The reader has seen how Silvio started for his ranch.

Raquel had no other ranch to go to; and so, for some time, did not think of getting up. The words of Brigada could be considered where she was as well as anywhere else. And yet, she did rise at last; and hastily donning a wrapper, went to the window, to look out over the miles that lay between her and the Batiboja buildings.

As she gazed the glare began to rise in the sky.

At first she did not suspect what it meant. Then she knew it could only be one thing; and for the moment was too conscience-stricken to move. Batiboja buildings were on fire; and if she had not taken their owner away from them he might have been on the spot, and saved them. With such a flame rising there could be no hope for them now.

Nevertheless, if Silvio did not know he must be told, and the sooner the better. He should be there as soon as horseflesh could carry him. She went to call her father.

Of course she did not find him.

Then she sought Silvio's room, and after a rap that was gentle; and more raps that were not so gentle, discovered that he, too, was missing. Had they seen the fire, and gone to the rescue? She would have thought so if she had believed they could leave the house in haste without alarming her. She went further, and found that every one else was asleep. Some of the men outside of the dwelling might have seen the fire, but as far as the inmates of the house went, they would all have remained in ignorance had it not been for Raquel. And, of course, her questions in regard to the absence of her father and Silvio had unsatisfactory answers.

She had some sort of wild notion of riding over to look on the ruins; but neither Miss Hutton nor Harry were there to keep her company, and she was in no great humor for a lonely ride, or one with such escort as was at hand. Instead, she finally sent a brace of peons off, to learn the worst, and return to report as soon as possible.

By the time they had started on their journey it was almost morning. She flung herself down, dressed as she was, to think; and, somehow, fell asleep.

In the morning no one awakened her; and it was long after her usual time for arising when she again opened her eyes.

Once awake and she was up without delay. Her messengers had not yet returned—indeed, they had not had time to cover the distance between the two places, even at a gallop. With impatience she waited for an hour or so. As no word came she hunted up a horse, and, attended by a peon, set out to learn the truth for herself.

It seemed strange there was no intelligence. Why had not her father or Silvio sent her word? They must have known that she knew of the burning of the buildings, and would wait feverishly to hear the particulars. If they failed her it must be because some one was hurt. She had a dozen terrors; and all the time was wide of the truth, that she was to discover later on.

More than half the distance between the two places had been covered. She rode at a hard gallop, and was in the neighborhood of the motte with its mass of trees, where Tomasso came to grief, as has already been shown, when a horseman appeared in front of her. By the time she actually suspected danger there was also a horseman on either side.

She drew rein in some alarm. These men came as though they might be anything but friends. After that she was a prisoner.

The horseman in front was a handsome little fellow, and not at all backward about saying what he had on his mind.

"Sorry, miss, to have to interfere with this ride of yours; but business before pleasure, every time. It will have to be done, though I hope I am not wrong in saying that you will not come to any harm whatever. If I am, I assure you no one will regret the fact more than your humble servant. You can see for yourself that it would be the height of imprudence to allow you to proceed after you were once aware that strangers answering to our description were in the neighborhood. Perhaps the stoppage will be only temporary. Please give an account of yourself. We will then know whether it is safe to allow you to go ahead."

After the introductory shock Raquel was more indignant than alarmed.

"By what right do you stop a lady, sirs?" was her stern question.

"By the right of might, miss; the only right that is recognized all the world over. I suspect that you are a lady of importance in more eyes than your own. If one was in the mood for that style of thing, you might make a valuable package. For the present you will go but little further. Later on we may be able to give a better guess at the facts, and act accordingly. No, don't attempt any nonsense. It would be most uncomfortable for all parties concerned,

but self-preservation is the first law of nature, and we can't allow even a lady to flourish fire-arms."

At the sharp warning Raquel gave up the idea of resistance, and allowed her pistol to drop back into its case. She knew she had fallen into bad hands, but perhaps they might not harm her if she acted with prudence. And if she could find out who these people were, and what they were after, it might be of some service to her friends. She had heard of cattle-raiders, from the American side of the border; though they had never, to her knowledge, penetrated this far, before.

Titus Thompson was the leader of the raiders, and he was able to make a captive feel at ease if any one could. He was watching Raquel earnestly, and smiled as he saw the change in her expression.

"That is right, senorita. Make the best of a bad bargain, always. In due time it will all come right. The only trouble is that we do not care to have our presence known for the present, and we can't trust a woman who has the secret. This way, if you please. Allow me to escort you to the waiting place. You will have company there, though I am not sure you will find it of the most agreeable kind. There will be one consolation about that. You are not obliged to fraternize unless you want to."

Raquel nodded, and said nothing. She began to wonder if these dashing Americans had anything to do with the conflagration of the previous night. Her attendant had been very summarily knocked off his horse, but outside of that had not been harmed. A few words were said to him now, in a tone of harsh command that brought forth a swarm of words that were all too few to promise the implicit obedience he was ready to give. The senorita had a chance to see that she might as well stick to the truth when the questions in regard to who she was, and the like, were again asked. If she did not tell, the peon would not be apt to remain quiet.

Quietly, then, the little party entered the motte, following the winding path that led to its center. When they came to a halt she saw a ragged, disreputable looking figure that lay with head propped up on a saddle, and a rope around his ankles and wrists known to the reader as Billy Button.

Silently she allowed the leader of the captors to assist her from her horse, and the act of dismounting brought her around facing Tomasso. He was in the same plight as the detective, but looked a great deal more savage over it. A second glance, and she was positive that this was one of the outlaws who had made the attack on Saphirestein and his party the previous day. As he was a prisoner, no more favored than herself, the sight of him in such a plight was reassuring rather than otherwise.

Nelson Burden was seated not far away, and had been having some conversation with his prisoners. From the expression of his face he had not been very successful in eliciting information.

"Had to do it," was the salutation of Thompson.

"The head of the young lady was pointed straight that way, and unless she was blind as a bat she could not help seeing us. If we keep on we can just spend the rest of our lives guarding prisoners, and there will be no one left to do the work. What are we going to do with them?"

"That begins to be a serious question. For the rest it hardly makes much difference. After a while they could be turned loose, and that would be the end of it. In fact our friend here with the black eyes is entitled to some little consideration, on account of his profession. But this gentleman from Glory Flat has eyes that are keen behind the blur, and there is no use to try to throw him off the track. He knows me and he knows you, and he won't give anything like a clear account of how and why he came here. Probably he is on the make, and is not likely to be troubled with any after-pangs of conscience. Will it be best to take him into service and pay him royally, or must we do the other thing?"

The Judge spoke seriously, and Thompson answered, shaking his head in a dubious manner that might mean anything:

"Not the other thing—for the present, at least. It might give the young lady a shock. Wait a little and I think I can get all the information we need out of him. You are entirely too gentle in your way of dealing."

"There is no question about where the fire was. That much they have made tolerably clear. But as to who was there last night, and how the blaze came to occur, is more than Button is able or willing to answer. I have taken my turn at him, now for yours."

Button roused himself as well as he could, and turned to Thompson.

"Bless yer soul! I ain't tryin' ter hang back. What I dunno how kin I tell? Ther' war a fire, an' I war 'feared ov bein' seen nigh, an' lit off ez fast ez I war able. Ef you men bedn't stopp'd me I'd bin a-goin' yit. That's all ther' war ov it."

"He tells not the whole truth," interrupted Tomasso. "He was there; and reason there

must have been why he should have fled. And he is more than he seems, since last night he had with him a Jew, who had come but a few hours before. What mischief they had worked together I know not, but it may be well to guess."

Thompson gave a low whistle of surprise, while Burden started up.

"A Jew! Then—that sounds suspicious. What became of him? And the girl that was with him—we saw the party on the road! Was anything seen of her?"

"She may have been burned for all that I know; but the old man was left in the hands of Tomasso and his brigands; and this was the companion who left him there. Ask him."

Tomasso, having found his tongue, seemed bent on using it to the disadvantage of his late messenger. If Billy Button was made to appear the more important prisoner there would be more chance for himself. He was hardly prepared to hear the bumper exclaim:

"An' this yere feller's Tomasso, bissell."

CHAPTER XXX.

THE LINKING OF A LEAGUE.

"We seem to have struck a bonanza," said Burden, not very much surprised at the intelligence of the bumper detective.

"I have been putting this and that together, and have come to the conclusion that the man we have been knowing as Billy Button is a great deal more dangerous than he looks. I will take back what I said a moment ago. There is no choice what is to be done with him. And, as for Tomasso, we will find a use for him. It is the Jew we are after; and we would as soon trade as not. If Saphirestein can't put his hand on the diamonds it will be a cold day for some one. Fact is, Mr. Brigand, we can use you all around. If we can't, you will have to swing along with Brother Button."

"Now, it is time that we relieved the mind of this young lady, who doubtless thinks we are a very terrible set of men. A few words will do that. We are connected with the law, as it is expounded and practiced on the American side of the border. We are in pursuit of a thief who has fled this way, and under the unfortunate condition of affairs between the two countries are compelled to act in a way that may seem irregular. We intend to have the fellow; and we do not intend to allow him to divide with the so-called officers of justice here—if they can be found—and so get scot-free with half of his booty. We mean no harm to any one else, but must protect ourselves, as you have already been told. Where were you going?"

The manner of the Judge was reassuring, and Raquel could see nothing to be gained by telling anything but the truth. In a few words she added her mite of information in regard to the conflagration, and requested that she might be allowed to proceed on her journey.

The Judge shook his head, and frowned.

"Sorry, miss, to put you to any discomfort, but it would be out of the question, for the present. We will probably have to go that way, ourselves, sooner or later, and do not care to have any one herald our approach. But when we do go we will take you along, and doubtless be able to restore you to the bosom of your father. We are expecting intelligence from that quarter, and may be able to make your mind easy in regard to the fate of your friends at the ranch. You see that we are open and above-board with you, and you can trust us accordingly."

Burden was as positive as he was patriarchal, and there was nothing to do but submit. Some young ladies might have made a scene, threatening vengeance, and all that. Raquel preferred to leave all that unsaid until after the positions were reversed. She bowed coldly, and fell back, though she kept an eye on Billy Button. He was a victim like herself, and in spite of appearance she was inclined to trust him rather than the smooth-spoken Judge, whom she had set down as the bigger rascal of the two. She would have asked how long she was to be a prisoner in the motte, but pride forbid her saying a word more than was necessary.

Tomasso showed his teeth like a wolf in a trap, but was silent; Burden and the little gambler conversed together in low tones, and the rest of the men lounged around or watched from the edge of the motte. The band was certainly waiting for something, or some one.

Finally, a whistle from one of the guards caused Burden to raise his head. For some minutes nothing was heard; but finally a horseman came dashing up to the edge of the timber. He flung himself to the ground, leaving his steed to stand where it was without hopple or tether, while he strode directly through the bushes, paying no attention to the path the rest had followed.

As he came out into the open, Raquel saw that he was a man of immense size, and that he was in no good humor.

"A thousand curses on the lay, anyhow!" he exclaimed, striding toward the Judge. "Booty will be as scarce as hens' teeth; and if I'm not away off we will have to fight to get away with our clothes on. The ranch is nothing but cinders, and the diamonds went up along with the rest. I, for one, vote to strike the back track as quick

as we can. It makes me tired to stay in this heaven forsaken country, that has nothing but starvation and hard knocks for the men who go in for honest industry. What sort of a corral have you started here? It don't look as though this was a profitable mixture."

The captain was in a rank bad humor, and scowled at Riquel in a way that of itself would have undone all the work of Burden so far as the young lady was concerned.

"Oh, quit," growled Thompson, who had nerve enough to say his say, no matter who it was his words might be addressed to. "Give us your news, and we can draw our own conclusions. The ranch has gone up, has it?"

"Root and branch; and the Jew is missing."

The information was given in a lower tone, since a side glance of Thompson, and a sinking of his own voice had their effect on the captain. At the close of the brief summary Tite gave a surly laugh.

"That's all stale. We had it here some time ago. And the sports! Have they corraled the plunder, and lit out, too?"

"Didn't you hear me say the diamonds went up in the flame? Sports, notlin'. They are holdin' on there just as if nothing had happened. It is the girl that keeps them there; but the way the Don was trying to console her I shouldn't wonder if he was to hold them both level. There is a heap left in the old man's strong box that is worth fighting for."

"To say nothing of the fact that like as not the sports have the jewels under their vests, and are holding on for what they can pick up. Oh, they are no slouches, and when you think they have lost the game, is the time to watch out for breakers. They know how to get there. I don't count on taking the back track until I know a little more. If Saphireinstein has given us the slip, we may as well begin at the next thing that opens up, if it is sacking a ranch, or driving off a herd. The moon is just right for that sort of work."

"My idea, too," said Burden, slowly. "Flash, you know how the land lies. With our force is there anything to hinder us getting together all the booty and beauty, and then making a clean home run?"

"What's the matter with taking the Jew along with us?" suggested Thompson. "If he is in the hands of yonder fellow, it won't be so hard to make a trade; and if he was pinched right well, he would find some way to ante up sooner than go under."

So far Flash had paid but little attention to the prisoners, his mind being too much engaged with the work on hand. Now he looked inquiringly at them.

"How's that? If you have the trail of the Jew, that's the one to follow. He has slipped through our fingers so often that I begin to want to roast him for the fun of the thing, if we do lose the booty. Who is the chap with the black eyes, anyhow?"

A few words gave him the information he asked for.

Then he clapped his hand down on Thompson's back in a way that was not altogether pleasant to the little gambler.

"Good enough to gamble on! Why, I know the fellow like a book, and he is just the man we are wanting. With his gang and ours we may as well fly an independent flag, and take the whole earth, hereabouts. Hope you haven't used him too rough, for he can be a mighty useful fellow if he wants to be. As for Button and the young lady—we will talk about them later on. There's only one thing to be done with the man if he turns out to be a spy. It's a pity you hadn't done it on the start before the blood got cold—but, no matter. Let me see what sort of a humor you have got our friend, Tomasso, in."

The brigand had a chance to use his eyes, and this conversation was not altogether Greek to him. He recognized the captain at last, although it had been some years since the two had met. When Flash turned toward him he was prepared for what followed, and met his advances in a manner that seemed to show he was willing to forget and forgive the rude handlign he had lately received.

"Lucky for you, old man, that I happened to remember you before it was too late," said Flash, as he led the Mexican apart, after having carelessly relieved him of his hands.

"These are only the bosses that you see here; but there is a terribly bad gang behind us, so that we have to look out for number one, from the word go. You have said just too much or just too little. Open out now, let me know how the land lies, and I will see if I can't arrange things for you with these other fellows. They have as much to say, you understand, as I do; and if we can't square it with them I can't help you. You have the Jew, eh?"

From much experience in the ways of outlaws, and being possessed with a belief that he was in the hands of men who were more desperate, even, than himself, it did not require much further thinking for Tomasso to make up his mind that his best course now would be to talk freely and not wander more than a mile from the truth. In a low, confidential tone, he told his old acquaintance all he knew about the Jew; but said nothing in regard to Espigador. He

reserved all mention of him for the time when it would seem more necessary, or more profitable.

"All right, old fellow! I guess you know me too well to try any yarn for the marines on your humble servant. What do you say? Can we work together; or will they have to slump you into the flume? We have been on the trail too long and put in too much time and money, to give it up now, even to oblige an old friend. It is pards; or it is pistols; and all the muzzles looking your way. It's the best I can do with you. How is it to be?"

Tomasso was in no hurry to answer. He did not altogether understand the lay of the land, though it began to be pretty plain that more than Espigador were interested in the capture of Saphireinstein, and that the Jew was a far more valuable prize than he had yet understood. He asked a few questions, speaking warily, for he did not wish the captain to know what his object had been in capturing the Jew.

Flash answered good-naturedly, but watching the Mexican keenly. He was aware that any alliance they might enter into would have to be for mutual profit, or it would not last long. Tomasso had no sentiment in his nature; and the men who were behind Flash were not of the kind who gave all for nothing.

The brigand had made some wild threats when he was talking to Espigador, and now they came back to him as realities. He could see his opportunity, and did not object to make use of it. Like one who had made up his mind for good and all he finally held out his hand.

"It is enough. There are those who have trifled with Tomasso—they shall find what he is when in earnest. Thou hast known Tomasso in the past; and he was one who did more than his share of the work. He is even a better man now. If it is for gold, trust him. He has the Jew already—and the American who came with him. There are others who may be made of even more worth, as I will explain to thee. Thou hast a prisoner, even now. She is the daughter of the man whom thou wilt have to fight the hardest if thou wouldst win treasure; and the strongest stroke that can be delivered at him is one through her. Yonder is the daughter of Espigador."

CHAPTER XXXI.

WHEELER WILSON FINDS AN OLD FRIEND.

WHEELER WILSON had not, so to speak, thrust his head into the lion's mouth without what he considered good reason. He had also a sort of plan already digested, though he would have to trust a great deal to luck in the matter of carrying it out. He did not believe that Tomasso would act in good faith, anyhow; or that he had the least suspicion that his offer would be accepted, when he proposed to give up the Jew for the sport. That made no difference to the young man, who believed that Saphireinstein was in more danger now than a little if it was found that the treasure which so many parties were trying to gather in was beyond the reach of those outlaws.

The departure of the chief was as unexpected as it was acceptable. It was not likely that anything would be done with him until Tomasso's return; and during the absence Wilson thought he would have an opportunity to look around a little, and see how the land lay. Indeed, he had half a hope, as he followed his guard, that he would not have to wait for Tomasso at all. When the latter had moved on out of sight and hearing he looked around at the men who had him in charge. They were contemplating him with no very friendly looks.

There were three of them in all. Two had certainly been born on the southern side of the border—and the third looked as though he must have come there full grown, since his features were unmistakably American. He was regarding Wilson curiously; and as the sport's eyes settled on him there was something like a smile about his lips. He was not in the shape for smiling either. His face had the pallor of one who might have been lately wounded; and there was a bandage over his shoulder to indicate that the wound was there.

"What's the fun?" asked Wilson, in a friendly sort of way. As the fellow had quit scowling it was possible he might be approached.

"Might not do to tell, unless I'm far off. If I make sure I know myself, perhaps I'll tell you later. Now, you better make ready to move. You must be pretty white, and there's not the ghost of a show for you to get away, anyhow. You can crawl up on that horse of yours and then follow orders. None of us has any more sense than to shoot at a man we see trying to peg off before he has the word go; and at close quarters, anyhow, we are all certain of death. Remember, all the shooting will be on one side if it once begins, and it won't be hard to tell who it will be that will get hurt. Now, then, steady as you are."

The sport had stepped into his saddle with so little effort that he was seated before the Mexicans knew what he was doing. Their carbines went up, and it would have taken only a word from their leader to have caused them to open fire.

As that was not given they continued to hold

their arms at a ready while the third of the party made his few preparations.

He tied the end of the lasso that was coiled on his saddle to the bit of Wilson's horse, allowing a few yards play, and then mounted himself.

"That will do, I reckon. You and I can ride side by side, without any one being uncomfortable, and the boys will follow close behind, with their carbines ready. It's safe enough that you can't get away, so I don't think you will try. And, stranger, I was smiling to think that, after all this fuss, we had got hold of the wrong man. Can't say that I am sorry, either. The party drilled me, but he did it in such a free and easy way that it was more than half a pleasure. If it's any satisfaction to you to fool Tomasso, keep mum, and I will never say a word. It will be a joke too good to be lost."

The latter part of this was said in a tone lowered just enough not to make the others suspicious; then he urged his horse forward without waiting for an answer, chuckling to himself as he went. He had not forgiven the desertion of the previous day, and was getting a good deal of satisfaction out of the prospect that his chief was being fooled.

The sport smiled, himself. Arden had given him the particulars of the affair, and he recognized the fellow in that way as being the one who had been drilled through the shoulder by the sport. He was sorry that the man knew of the deception; but from the humor he showed it was possible that he might be able to put him to some use later on. The situation did not admit of discussion at present, and their way was pursued in silence.

Tomasso did not seem to fear that his presence in the neighborhood would bring out any strong remonstrance, since he had not thought it worth while to change his headquarters, which were not far from the spot where he had ambuscaded the Saphireinstein party. As he could not have found a place better suited for his use, probably he was willing to run some risk, sooner than to occupy a less suitable position. There was no attempt at concealing the route by which it was reached; a bit of seeming carelessness that was not particularly reassuring to the sport. It looked as though his chances were considered too desperate to require any caution. The latter part of the journey was made on foot, however. The entrance to the stronghold did not allow of equestrian approach.

"Pretty fair position, this," thought Wheeler Wilson, as he looked around the little amphitheater in which the bandits made their headquarters. "Only one way in, I suppose; and I don't see that there is any way out. Perhaps I have gambled on my luck once too often. They are not killing themselves with carelessness, either. Couldn't keep better guard if they were regulars. There is reason for their keeping up their caution, too, and that is what I want to find out. Don't see anything of Moses; but it is safe to bet that he is somewhere near. If they don't hustle me into a hole too soon, I guess I can find out all that is worth knowing for the present. Suppose I will soon know what is the order for the day in the absence of the captain, and then I can begin to lay my plans for future usefulness."

During this soliloquy he stood by himself, though the two men who had all along been in his rear remained at about the same distance as before, with their weapons still at a ready, waiting for the return of their comrade, who had moved away immediately after reaching the spot.

He came back shortly.

"It's all right now," he said, waving away the guards with his hand.

"It's not likely you will try to get away until after you have seen the captain, and if you did try you couldn't do it. I am good for your safe keeping until Tomasso gets back, and I am going to have you here."

"Make yourself easy. It was too hard getting here to think of leaving in a hurry. You can count on me until the captain turns up. After that will be time enough to make up one's mind what is to be done. You will be safe, anyhow."

The outlaw appeared to have full confidence in the word of the sport for he had no sooner seen him sit down than he moved away, leaving him to his own thoughts and devices.

The spot was a niche in the rocks, so deep as to be almost a cave. It resembled a fair-sized room with one side taken out, and the opening was commanded by a guard who stood at some little distance, where he could also keep an eye on a rude cabin that was built against the same ledge under which Wilson was confined.

"The big odds that Moses is there," thought the sport, as he noted the double duty of the sentinel. "If he keeps up his vigilance it don't look as though there would be much chance to him, but one way or another I have got to do it. I must tell him that the diamonds are not lost—hold on! That won't wash, exactly. Lost they are; but not the way he thinks. I can give him a hint that they may not be so hard to find, and that if he keeps his courage up Arden will pull him through; to say nothing of myself and there seems to be several prizes that are worth the fighting for. It is about time the

party from Glory Flat was coming on the scene. When they arrive the fun will just begin. If we can't play one gang against another we can have lots of fun trying to do it."

"The party from Glory Flat has arrived," said a quiet, and unmistakably feminine voice not very far behind him. Perfectly careless whether his words were overheard or not he had uttered aloud the latter part of his soliloquy.

The interruption was a surprise; and the more so because the tones sounded familiar. Nevertheless, he neither started nor turned suddenly, but in his quietest way drawled out:

"Is that so? Then, if I am not away off, you must be Frank, of the Antelope. I didn't get to see you, the last time I was in that handsome little burg; but I heard that you were in town. What in the name of wrath has brought you out here?"

"Wrath it is, and on more shoulders than one, if I get safely out of this. But do you mean to tell me that we did not meet—though without a sign of recognition on your part—and that I did not save your life, back at the Flat? Oh, you may as well look around. They know I am here, worse luck to them! I am a prisoner, like you seem to be; waiting for the return of their captain. I did not resist, and so perhaps have a better chance with him than you have; but I am not afraid, for the sake of old times, to be known as your friend. If you killed a half-score of them before you were taken in, it was nothing more than the wretches deserved."

"Excuse me, then," laughed Wilson, as he carelessly turned toward the spot whence the voice seemed to proceed. The voice belonged to what appeared to be a handsome boy—but, all the same, it was Frank's.

"I hardly thought you lived about here; and as I knew you were apt to be a rather impulsive sort of an iceberg when the notion came, I wanted to give you a chance to reconsider and amend. The gentleman out there with a gun is watching me very sharply. I understand the facts in the case; but I don't quite catch on to the motives. You certainly didn't follow me down here?"

"And if I did?" asked the girl, defiantly.

"Bosh! Of all breaks broken idols are the worst. Anything else a little gum-stickum, or a bottle of prepare I glue will make as good as new, but when the love-light goes out of a pair of black eyes it's gone forever. You wouldn't have me now for a fortune."

"Perhaps you are right about that; but all the same, there is no need for you to deny that you were in some danger that night at Antelope, and that I took your part against my friends."

"To serve your own ends, then. But that is neither here nor there. You made the same mistake that several other people have done in their time, and took my side—pard—as he seems to be for the present—for me. It makes no difference what you came here for, or what has happened in the some years that have elapsed since I last set eyes on you. If you need me, I am at your service—of course, not forgetting my own affairs. Were you alone on the trail?"

"Alone? Yes. I am fated to be always alone. Ask me not the reason for my journey. Enough that I am here, and that I ask the help of no man: least of all yours. It was simply to give you warning that I spoke. The men from Glory Flat are here, and raging doubly that so far they have missed the trail. If the prize slips through their fingers they will not be pleasant men for you to meet. They have a heavy score marked up against you."

"Not any heavier than these fellows imagine they ought to have. Been here long?"

"Only a few hours, but long enough to see much. Your man is over yonder."

She gave a nod of the head toward the cabin which the sport had already noted.

"And where did you spring from? I thought I was alone—I'll swear I was alone—and yet I wasn't alone. Did you drop down, or did you come through the solid rock?"

"Neither. There is something like a door over yonder, and I suppose they thought they had it closed, tightly enough. I grew tired of the inner sanctum, and made my way out just in time to recognize you. It looks like a passage that a good man could defend for some time, if the worst came to the worst, and he had arms. Did they strip you?"

"Clean as a whistle. But when the time comes it may not be so hard to stumble on a little arsenal. I don't want you to run into any unnecessary danger; but if you are in a box, and no way to get out, perhaps we had better work together for the present. If you have a chance to see the Jew tell him that I am here, and that Arden will look after his daughter. That which he knows of was not lost in the ruins; and when he gets out of here there may be a chance to pay off old scores, if nothing else. I'll try to see him myself, but I may fail. Here goes for a stroll."

CHAPTER XXXII.

MORE SURPRISES THAN ONE.

IN spite of his brave words, Tomasso was by no means certain that he would cast his lot

finally with his lately-found allies. There was a question in his mind as to which course of two or three would be the most profitable. Of course that one was the one he proposed to follow. Espigador had not met him at the appointed spot; but then it might be that the Don had discovered beforehand the presence of the unwelcome intruders, and retired in good order. There was a promise of a thousand dollars for the death of the two sports; and a large, though not altogether definite, sum to be paid for the living body of the Jew. If the Don kept to his word there might be much more in serving him than in sharing plunder with the Americans. And for the rescue of Raquel he thought he could command almost his own price.

Yet he talked in earnest, and Flash was inclined to trust him, since it was for mutual profit. The suggestion in regard to Raquel decided him. He held out his hand.

"Shake, pard; and I'll tell the others that it is settled!"

The two shook hands, and then turned to Thompson and the judge. It did not take long to ratify the terms of partnership; and as they supposed that Tomasso knew all about the diamonds which the Jew had engaged to bring, the others spoke freely in his presence.

"Hang it all!" exclaimed Thompson, tired at length of beating around the bush. "The long and short of it is that somebody must be trusted. If we ever want to get our forces together, Tomasso must bring his men, or we must go along with him to join them. Which is it going to be?"

"Go along with him, of course," answered Flash. "If we are seen I'll wager no one will care to interfere with us. We won't be apt to make anything by waiting here; and as I take it his headquarters are just in fair striking distance of both ranches. It will be a few miles extra, but what of that? We can leave a sentinel to keep an eye on what is going on, and pick him up again before the work begins. I vote for the mountain retreat."

In another moment the start would have been made, prisoners and all. The appearance of two men on the plain, still half a mile distant, but riding straight for the motte, caused a pause. Tomasso had seen them first, and after a little recognized Espigador as one of the horsemen. He would not be an altogether unwelcome captive, and they watched him advance until almost within carbine-shot distance. When he halted suddenly, and looked downward, they were sure he had discovered something suspicious.

"The old fox!" muttered Burden. "Will he be bluffed out by a footprint, and take the back track? He could put everybody on guard, and be looking out best for his own interests. Is there no way to stop him?"

Tomasso, without a word, started forward, and coolly rode out from under the cover of the motte. He knew Espigador would remain at seeing him.

He was not wrong in his calculation. The Don looked at him long and earnestly, but permitted him to approach.

"Thou art late, and not more than of half a mind to come at all," was the greeting of Tomasso, as he ranged up alongside of the Don.

"Thou art not so anxious for the Jew, now that the time of payment is at hand. Perhaps thou wouldst be willing to do without him altogether. And the thousand thou wast to pay for the death of the American—hast thou brought it? There can be no delay, and if thou art not ready, so much the worse for thee and thine."

The Don placed his hand on a pistol. The address was not altogether pacific, and was not without suspicious.

"Thou hast not slain either of them as yet, and if they waited for thy hand to shut their life off they would stand good chance to die of old age. And for the Jew, I pay not till he is delivered. Thou hast had large earnest already, and no doubt if he really is in thy hand there were fat pickings came with him, so that thou canst afford to wait. I expected to meet thee here alone; but from the footprints on the plain there are a dozen with thee. Did it need an army to back thee in coming face to face with Espigador?"

"Perhaps there are prisoners there that are worth the guarding," suggested Tomasso warily. "If it is thy wish to have the Jew the sooner he is in thy hands the better, so thou payest the price. Art thou ready for him now?"

"Differently was it arranged when the bargain was made, and here I have no use for him; nor is he there to give to me. Tomasso, I begin to doubt thee."

"Not more that I have doubts of thee. Money! money! money! It is money that I want."

"And money thou shalt have when thou hast fulfilled thy share of the contract. Thou alone wast to bring him to the spot we know of, with his belongings untouched. After that came the payment."

"And the thousand in hand for the dead Americans. Forget not that. Half of that is earned already. Pay me that, and the half of the sum promised for the Jew, and I take him wherever wanted. Now is thy time to trade. Haggle over the bargain and I keep him for my

own use. There may be more wealth in him than all thou hast promised."

"There is danger in this mad doubt of thine. I care not to be seen coming to this spot again, since there is already a trail to the motte that may tell an ugly story hereafter. Yet, if thou wilt wait here till after nightfall, I will join thee with the coin, and thou canst take thy time to killing the other American. Where he is he can do but little harm."

"Agreed! Thy hand on it! I stay here until after dark, and wait for thee. But, see that there be no failure then. Thy ranch is not far distant, and Tomasso makes himself even with those who treat him not honestly."

"Villain! Wouldst thou threaten me? If a better man hires thee to do his dirty work, is not that enough of honor and profit? Another word like that and it shall be thy last. Is the bargain made; or do we draw out, each man for himself?"

"The bargain is made," answered the bandit, sulkily. "But waste no time. If it comes to war Tomasso can fight as well as thou. Go now, and see that no company returns with thee. There might be nothing save a corpse or two to be found here, either then or the next morning."

The friend with Espigador was Tiburcio Creanza. He was discreetly waiting in the background, and watching the outlaw's every movement, though glancing past him toward the motte at times. He was not near enough to overhear what was said, and yet was within pistol range, so that his presence was a safeguard that was desirable enough for one coming to an interview with a man like Tomasso, when he was in an uncertain humor to boot.

At this juncture Tiburcio uttered a shout of warning, and spurred forward, a pistol in his hand, just as a wild cry arose from the motte, and a horse came bursting out from the entrance to the trail that led into its recesses.

The horse had two riders; a man in front, but behind him floated feminine drapery, and over his shoulder was a face which Creanza recognized as that of Raquel.

Tomasso looked backward, to see what it was that had created the commotion, and by that gave away the advantage. Before he could turn again Espigador had swept him from the saddle, and gone on, side by side with his friend. He too had recognized his daughter, and startled as he was at the sight he lost no time in starting for her side.

How the two came to be together the Don could not imagine; but in the man who was evidently trying to save his daughter he recognized the fellow he had seen not many hours before at the Batihoja Ranch, acting as the messenger of the outlaws. The Don had but little faith in sudden reformation, and believed that the man was only deserting his friends because he thought he saw profit in the operation. He did not suspect that Button was in disguise, or that he professed to be a terror to such evil-doers as Tomasso and his gang.

There was no time to think over that now. Hardly had Button got under way when the pursuers began to make their appearance. It was Captain Flash's steed that was being pressed into service, and his master was one of the first to follow it; but closely came the others, some mounted and some on foot. It was a chase for life, since no one cared to fire at the steed, and Raquel protected the detective. It was impossible to reach him with a bullet without striking her.

But handicapped by the double weight, there could be but little doubt that Flash's steed would soon be overtaken, good though he was; and as Button was unarmed the result would not have been in doubt, as far as the two were concerned. Could Espigador and his friend reach them first?

The Don had courage, and great though he speedily saw the odds would be he never hesitated. And knee to knee with him rode Creanza. Neither were of the kind to court a fight against odds; but they would not shun one, if it was necessary to save Raquel from the hands of the marauders—for such at a glance they decided the men in the rear to be. Of course they were allies of Tomasso; but they were not of his regular force.

It was well for Tomasso that the Don struck so quickly, and so hard. He was out of the way before a weapon was in his hands, or he might have fared worse. Creanza did throw out his hand as he raced past him; but the bandit lay without motion, and so the shot was saved for use when more needed. Just now he saw a better movement to make. He dropped his revolver back into its holster; and caught at the bridle of Tomasso's horse a moment later. The animal had shied when its master fell, and then, making a little wheel had come in alongside of Tiburcio.

Flash was on foot, but foremost of the horsemen rode Tite Thompson. He was well mounted, and under all circumstances was a perfect shot. He did not follow exactly in the wake of the fugitives; but obliquing a little aimed to forge ahead so far that the detective would be uncovered. With him out of the saddle he thought it would be an easy matter to overhaul the senorita, even if she did not drop

with him. She might get some broken bones, but of that she would have to take the chances.

Creanza had his own plan too. He knew a good deal more about the equestrian skill of the young lady than did the little gambler, and pressed the rowels tighter to the sides of his own steed, in a desperate effort to meet the fugitives before they were overtaken. Button was doing nothing save crouch in the saddle and send the horse straight ahead. If he only kept that up Tiburcio saw a way to aid them, provided Raquel was unarmed, and retained her native coolness. More and more he oblied, so that the double-freighted steed would surely pass him. He saw with a thrill of pleasure that he was gaining in the race; that Thompson was doing little more than hold his own.

He could see nothing of Espigador, who was now behind him; but if his own life was spared he did not count on needing him. With a great cry he wheeled his horse, as the two thundered by, and raced up alongside, the led horse between him and the fugitives. Only a finished horseman could have guided a strange animal so that it nearly touched the skirts of the senorita. He had already attracted her attention; now, he shouted:

"Leap, Raquel, for the love of Heaven, leap! On his back and we are all safe!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A THIEF IN THE NIGHT.

The escape was a partnership affair, in which Raquel assisted fully as much as Button. While the discussion of affairs between Tomasso and his newly-found allies was going on she had paid some little attention to her fellow-prisoner. They were not very widely separated, and almost insensibly they edged together. Then Raquel cut the cords, and the man led the way in a dash for freedom. From what they had overheard they thought there was a large force in sight; and that if they could temporarily elude pursuit their safety might be secured. They were not noticed, in the interest excited by the conference that was going on out on the plain; but providentially came across the horse of Captain Flash, which had followed its master some little distance into the motte. Its appropriation followed as a matter of course, and then came the race for liberty. The first thing they saw on emerging from the timber was the Don and his friend; and toward them the two raced. They saw Tomasso's downfall, and a little later the senorita heard the cry of Tiburcio, and divined his plan.

She needed no second invitation. She had her nerves braced for the spring, and thrust out her hand until it rested upon the saddle of the riderless steed. Then, she floated across, from one horse to the other, without delay or seeming effort.

As he saw her springing to safety Creanza, mistrusting the accuracy of his aim under such circumstances, fired point-blank at Tite Thompson's horse.

It was a large mark, and the distance small. The sport went down with his steed, and by the time he had touched the plain the four were bunched together, and riding off in rapid retreat.

Espigador did not draw rein until he had led his little party what he thought was a safe distance from the motte. He noted that there was only the semblance of pursuit, and that for but a short distance; but he was not sure that the outlaw did not have a stronger force under cover, which might yet be brought into action.

Once satisfied that they were so far away that it would be almost impossible to overtake them he slackened the pace, to hear an explanation, and to give his plans.

Very little time did it take for him to be put in possession of the facts as they were; and impatiently did he answer the questions of his daughter in regard to what had taken place at the ranch, and the safety of her lover.

"Yes, yes. They are all safe, and will be at the ranch before we arrive. He brings with him a girl—the daughter of a Jew who sought his place with the idea of trading, as you know already. Have little to do with her. She is not of thy sort. Tiburcio, I can trust thee to take Raquel home."

"With my life will I guard her."

"I leave her in thy hands. For the present say nothing of this adventure, or how it ended. It might cause useless excitement, and interfere with my plans to get even with them for this outrage, and relieve the country of the presence of the villains. When I see you again I will explain more fully what it is that I have in my mind. Now, there is no time. Farewell. And for you, sir, come with me. I can learn more of you as we go along."

The Don turned sharply to Button, and spoke in a tone that was imperative. There was a covert motion that meant it would be the worse for him if he did not obey.

Although he had passed through about all the adventure he cared for, just at the present, the detective saw no particular reason why he should not accept the invitation. He had seen the Don at the ranch, and was aware that he was a man of large landed possessions. The simple fact of the chief of the outlaws having sent him a mes-

sage was not a suspicious matter, especially after seeing how the outlaw had been treated when the two met. And as he was unarmed he could not resist, anyway. Button followed without a word of demur.

As the two rode away in silence, taking a course that would lead them in the direction of the Batihoja Ranch, Raquel followed them for a little with her eyes. There were questions she would have asked her father had he given her the opportunity; and she was not altogether satisfied at seeing him go off in such a mood, and in such company. Creanza interpreted her humor, and spoke in a reassuring way.

"Ask him no questions, and suffer him to take his own way. It is for thy safety that he thinks. This was no doubt not an accident, but a plan. In their hands thou wouldst have fallen at some time, if not to-day. Take his advice, and mine. Say nothing more of this until he bids thee speak. And it is time that we were off if we do not yearn for a night ride, and perchance a meeting with more of these strangers, who are gathered here for no good."

Espigador had spoken truly when he cautioned Silvio in regard to the jealous streak in the disposition of his daughter. She remembered now the mention of the daughter of the Jew by the outlaws in their conversation, and what they said of the attentions of Silvio. Of course there could be no truth in the story, yet she was possessed with an uneasiness and a desire to see her lover in the presence of the girl whose beauty she unfortunately could remember only too well. As they rode along she asked her escort some questions that made him smile to himself. He understood her mood better than she thought.

It was late when they reached the ranch, and the party from the place of Batihoja had arrived before them. Miss Hatton came forward to receive her friend. She had already learned that Raquel had set out for Silvio's, and was surprised to see her return so soon. As the party under Silvio had made a detour for the purpose of meeting some of the Don's dependents, they had passed the senorita, and the chances were that she would make the whole journey in vain.

Even with her confidant Raquel was reticent. She said that Tiburcio had fortunately met her, and saved her much of the distance, and then began a shower of questions concerning the occurrences of the previous night that left no room for questions in return. When Helen had fairly begun to answer, Silvio made his appearance, and had something to say for himself, which Helen discreetly neglected to hear.

"And the party I found in the mountains?" asked Raquel. "Are they here? Especially the handsome Jewess. I have had a presentiment that in some way they were to bring me evil luck. How it is to be I know not; but I could wish they were far enough away, or that the bandits had kept them, rather than that they should have come near to me and what should be mine."

"If the truth has been told, part of your wish has been realized. The Jew is in their hands, and they are so bold about it that I doubt they would make no bones over taking the rest of us if they fancied there was money to be made in the attempt. I feel relieved since you are with us here. Had you not come when you did I should have gathered a force and set out in search of you, though it would have interfered with plans that we had already laid. His daughter came with us hither, and my word was pledged to her father for her safe keeping. I am going to trust her to you for the night since I must be away."

"She is beautiful, I believe," said Raquel, thoughtfully. "Perhaps it will be safer so. Better that she should be in my keeping than in thine. And after to-night? How long is she to be my guest? Until her father has been ransomed from the bandits? And by whose gold? They have no doubt stripped him, and they deal only for hard cash."

"Perhaps he will need no ransom," answered Silvio, ignoring the first question. "He is a cunning old fox, I hear, and had with him two men who will make at least one effort to get him out of their hands."

"With thy assistance, no doubt. Where is this paragon? I would see her. Perhaps we may become friends after all."

"She is no paragon, though she is handsome enough as women go. She refused to come with us at first, and we had almost to force her away. Had it not been for their guide, who reasoned the matter with her, I doubt if she would have come."

"Ah, the American, who, single-handed, beat off the gang of outlaws! From the few words I had with him I should judge that he is a man worth knowing. Is he here?"

"Not now, though, without doubt he will be, later on, in the night. That is, in case nothing happens to him. He goes into the line of danger to seek for intelligence of the Jew."

"Nothing will happen to him. Nothing ever does happen to such men. It is he that happens to others. When he comes I will see him. There is something behind all this that no one else can, or will, tell to me. Let us seek the fair Jewess at once."

Silvio did not appear at all hurt at the praise of the All-around Sport. Raquel's idea was too near his own, for that. And as his affianced was not altogether in a cheerful humor he was satisfied to close the conference without any attempt at tender passages.

Rebecca did not seem as overwhelmed by grief as Silvio's words had indicated. She met her hostess quietly, and spoke cheerfully, even though she had little to say. She was a stranger, in a strange land, and about the fate of her father there was a great uncertainty, but until she had further intelligence she did not intend to give way to despair. She would wait in patience. And under this roof she hoped that she would be safe. She would be as little trouble as possible, to any one, and hoped that she would not trespass on the hospitality of Raquel for more than a day or so.

That was what she said, and for any more definite information Raquel questioned in vain. Her father had come into these regions on business, and beyond that he had not confided in her. It may have been that he came to see Silvio; and it was possible that he would have gone further on the following day. Mr. Arden might know what was his destination, but it was not likely that he could tell his business. Mr. Arden was their guide and guard through these regions; they had never seen him until they met him on this journey, and when they parted it would not be likely they would ever see him again.

"It is because if one knew more about his business it would be the easier to guess in regard to his present condition, and prospects. You know he may have escaped from the outlaws—or he may never have been in their hands at all. You know, you can never believe a word they say, unless there is some outside evidence to corroborate their words. We will try to keep you well and happy while you stay with us, and send you away at the last rejoicing. I hope the end will be the riddance of the mountains of the pests. They are not so great in numbers as in audacity. After this, until they are disposed of, there will be no safety for any one."

That was the end of a conversation that was quite formal. Raquel had an appetite that was to be looked after, and it began to give her more trouble than her curiosity.

After awhile Silvio disappeared without any formal leave-taking.

He did not care to be questioned as to the reason of his departure; and, somehow, the last few days there was a shadow between him and Raquel, that threatened to grow darker, unless he kept out of her way until she had time to rid herself of the fancies that probably raised it. He did not care to tell her whether he was going, either. To know would either trouble or anger her. If he had known what had happened to her that afternoon he might have thought she would be, at least, uneasy at being left almost defenseless at the ranch.

He did not trouble himself about these things, however, but went out to where a dozen men were already waiting; and very silently the band left the ranch, striking a course that led toward the haunts of the outlaws. Silvio had promised Rebecca that he would do what he could for her father, and he intended to keep his word.

The feminine inmates of the building were too wearied to think much about what was going on elsewhere when they had once thrown themselves down to seek repose. Rebecca's troubles, and Raquel's trials faded away in less time than they could have hoped for, and at midnight the house was wrapped in silence.

Rebecca was sleeping serenely when a heavy hand was pressed over her mouth.

Of course she awakened suddenly, and if she had been able would have uttered a scream. But the hand held her steady, and another hand, that gathered her wrists in a powerful grasp, kept her motionless.

"Not a word or a struggle," hissed a voice in her ear.

"If you alarm the house my road to escape is open, and you will be left dead behind me. Your only chance is to come to terms. How is it to be? Remember! A sound and this knife goes home."

There was a light burning in the room, and Rebecca was able to see her captor, though the opportunity did her but little good. His face was masked, and though it was flung back from his shoulders to give freedom to his arms, the cloak that he wore draped his figure so much as to render its outlines uncertain.

After the first start Rebecca was coolness itself. She had undergone such an experience before and had escaped unharmed; she kept her courage up with the hope that she would have the same good fortune again. She watched the unknown intruder with unwinking eyes, waiting for what he might say next.

"It is life or death with you now. Go with me quietly; or die, now."

He spoke so firmly that there was no room to doubt that every word was meant. In a guarded whisper she answered:

"I will go."

"And whatever Tomasso may do with the Jew I still hold the power to wring his heart if

he escapes; or to get some further vengeance on the accursed brood. If she knew what might may be in store for her she would sooner die now."

It was Espigador under the disguise; and with reckless daring he stole her away from his own house, with not a soul within it, save he and his prisoner, being any the wiser.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

FRANK, OF THE ANTELOPE, HEARS NEWS.

FRANK, of the Antelope, had made good a part at least of her threat to Tite Thompson. She had followed him this far on his journey, keeping well out of his sight, and waiting to know what his object really was. He had given her a reasonably true statement of his intentions, but she was possessed by the demon of jealousy, and was inclined to violence when she was in that mood.

As their conversation explained, she and Wheeler Wilson were old acquaintances, and at one time something more. He had been a temporary captive to the witchery of her bright eyes; but fortunately neither was seriously smitten, and they drew apart without much regret or unpleasant feeling on either side. They could be friends on occasion, though Wilson had no desire to renew the old-time intimacy; and since then Frank's heart had become completely wrapped up in the little gambler, who had had time to become somewhat wearied of her affection.

She had made no resistance when captured in camp by some of Tomasso's band, and accepted the situation without much fear for the future. The little she had said that was understood, and the undaunted front she preserved, impressed her captors rather favorably—for in spite of her costume they had seen at first glance that she was a woman. They simply escorted her to headquarters, and told her that there she was to remain until the captain came, who would decide upon what was to be done in her case. Probably he would be content to take whatever wealth she had about her, and let her go on her way.

As Wilson had come out of his own free will, and the American who was acting as lieutenant in the absence of the captain knew that he was not the sport who had done such damage when the attack was made upon the party of Saphirestein, he was allowed some latitude also. When he strolled out from under the rock no one attempted to turn him back, and all that was done was to keep a sharp watch on him that he did not get too near the entrance to the little amphitheater. Unarmed as he was, that was about the only move that he could make that they would care to interfere with.

Frank watched him just as curiously. She knew nothing of why he was there, save that it had some connection with the Jew, who was their fellow-prisoner. What was he going to do? She remembered some of the things that he did when he was a nearer friend than he was now, and thought that if he had not lost his old-time reckless cunning, he might give their captors a surprise.

Once out in the open, Wilson saw that they were not by any means alone in the retreat. In addition to the three men who had brought him in, there were at least as many more; and though taking their ease for the present every man had his weapons belted on, ready for business at any time.

At some little distance there was a fire, at which one of the outlaws was managing some pots and kettles after a fashion that indicated there was a meal in preparation. He leisurely filled his pipe and strolled in that direction. Before he had gone far he came face to face with the American lieutenant, who touched his revolver significantly as he cautioned:

"Remember! No foolishness. Whatever the captain says here, goes. Outside of that we don't pay much attention to anything. He told us to keep you here till he came; and we mean to do it. If you behave yourself I'll try to give you a comfortable time. If you cut up any shines, down goes your apple-cart for good and all."

"Thanks. I understand the situation, and am just as anxious to see him as he is to get another glimpse of me. I think I can make it worth his while to talk; and there might be a heap of money in the things that he knows. All the same, keep an eye on me. I sometimes break loose without warning, and I don't want to take advantage of a man who has used me rather white. With the Greasers it's a different matter. I haven't the prejudices that some men have, but I don't admire them; and am apt to shoot before the bat drops if I think there is a circus coming."

"Guess you won't do much shooting this morning—some other morning, perhaps, but just now I guess you are harmless. But don't strut, or some of these turkey-cocks will mount you, heels or no heels. I'm your solid friend, you see. Take advice, and live longer."

The advice was good enough, but as it only was advice, and not an order, Wheeler Wilson preferred to take his own way. He almost thought that he could make a friend out of this

easy-going outlaw, and would have tried it if he had not had something else on hand that was more important. He wanted to see the Jew first of all, if it was possible, and further conversation with this man would more than likely end in the defeat of that object.

He wondered how it came that this fellow was over a gang of Mexicans, even temporarily; for, as a general thing, the race did not take kindly to such officers; but he let that go also, as one of the questions that could keep until he was more at leisure. He went on to the fire, lighted his pipe, and began his return stroll without a word more from any one. When he got near the cabin he halted and looked in through the open door.

Saphirestein was there, and seemed lost in unpleasant thoughts. Although he was staring straight out he did not see the sport, and his face had the look on it of one who had been wrestling with woe, and woe had had the best of it.

Wilson removed the pipe from his mouth, allowing the smoke to curl slowly between his lips, and watched Moses for a time without speaking. When he saw that his presence was not noted, the time for him to speak appeared to have come.

"You look down in the mouth, old man; what's the matter now?" was his salutation, which broke up the unpleasant reverie in a hurry, as the tones of his voice were recognized.

"Mine craycious! V'ot vos dose?" exclaimed Saphirestein, with a start.

"Wheeler Wilson, very much at your service," was the answer. "I suppose I have been putting my head in the lion's mouth; but I'm not the kind to worry over that till I feel the jaws close. Why don't you say the same thing? There's nothing made by grizzling; and when a fellow has me on my back is the time I want to be doing my level best to turn him. At least I would if I ever was downed; but so far in life I have generally managed to come out on top. In the few exceptions we lay side by side, and got up to take a new hold. How have things been going since you lit out? Don't it strike you that you made rather an ass of yourself to throw up your cards when you had heaps of money and two such backers as the All-around Sports? Wake up, man; and tell me how soon you want to get out of this, so I can make my arrangements according."

The bantering tone of the sport had its effect in rousing Saphirestein from the apathy into which he had fallen. Yet he did not offer to leave the protection of the hut. A glance at the weaponless waist of the sport convinced him that Wilson was a prisoner, the same as himself. He shook his head warningly, and spoke in a frightened tone.

"When everidings vos lost dere vos nodings left to liffe vor."

"Perhaps things are not as badly lost as you think for. Rebecca is in no particular danger, or you wouldn't see me here. I can't exactly put my hands on the diamonds at present, but I can assure you they didn't go up in the blaze, since I have seen the empty case—and would have brought it along if I hadn't thought you might need it again. And as for Espigador—I don't believe he is half as terrible a man as you think for, as long as Arden and I are backing your hand. If our friend, Tomasso, would only open out to bed-rock perhaps there would be nothing terrible about him, at all. I have seen bad men taken into camp before now, and there wasn't much trouble about doing it. When the time comes the Don will throw up his hands as promptly as any of them."

"Isb dot so?" asked Moses, more hopefully.

And then he ceased to speak, and stared over Wheeler Wilson's shoulder, as though he could see a ghost behind it.

No ghost was there, however; but a bit of very real flesh and blood, in the shape of Frank, of the Antelope.

"Holy Abraham!" he finally exclaimed.

"Whose daughter art thou?"

"Nobody's daughter," she answered, promptly, stepping forward as she spoke.

"I might be somebody's son. Can you give me an idea of who I look like?"

"Id vos der dress ov der poy, put Saphirestein vos not vooled. Dere vosh but von face looks likes dot—id vosh tead yearsh ago. V're did you come from?"

"Don't ask leading questions like that. Tell me first what there is to be accumulated, and where I can find the tomb of the dear departed. Then I can give you all the answers that a reasonable man ought to look for. It is part of my business; and you won't be able to tell them from the truth."

Her uneasy, reckless laugh seemed to impress Saphirestein as much as her appearance had done.

"Dot vosh a mistake. Dere is monish waiting vor dose face, undt if I vosh outd ov dis I could show you v're it vosh. You dells me der druth, undt I might oxblain."

"It was only the truth that I told you. I am indeed nobody's daughter. I am simply a waif and a stray, grown up I know not how, and trusting myself alone."

"V'ot prought you here, den? V're vos you porn?"

"I came because I was a bigger fool than most. For the rest, you tell; you can't prove it by me. One place seems to be the same as another, and I have been everywhere."

"Undt have you effer heard der name ov Espigador?"

"Can't say that I have. It sounds familiar like, too. What is his business? Anything in the card and pistol line? I have met sports without end; but of late years my acquaintance didn't go much further."

"Dere vosh an Espigador; undt dere vosh an odder Espigador. Der von vosh tead long ago. If he vosh dy fadder—so. Der odder vosh his foe, undt vouldt pe dine. Be vave of him. If I vosh outd ov dis I might help you, but id vosh leetle use der dalk. Id ish doo late."

"Rather late in the day, old gentleman—for me. I am not acquainted with the Espigadors, and I don't know that I want to be. Perhaps there is a mys ery that would bring wealth if it was unraveled; but what do I want with wealth, more than I can make for myself? I might care for it, perhaps, if it would make others truer; but Frank, of the Antelope, is too old to change her ways, or become anything but what she is. And I have little faith and hope left for this world. Perhaps I can find the gentleman you refer to in the next."

The hopeless, indifferent tone of the girl had just the contrary effect from what might have been expected. Saphirestein brightened.

"Dere vosh vengeance in life. Dill dot vosh accomplished, vhy shouldt you die? Ve vill get outd ov dis, undt vight it midt der Don. I vill askh noddings for mineself; id vill pe enough to get even mit him. Dis dime it vill pe to der death."

"That's about the way to talk it," said Wilson. "And when I do my little best to help to the good end, perhaps you and I will be the better friends. I haven't made up my mind whether it is best to get out of this, at once, or wait and have a few confidential words with Tomasso. He knows a heap; and if he would only talk, his knowledge would help amazingly in the final round-up, when everybody gets his dues, and this Espigador meets his destiny."

"If der outlaw cooms alone, dot vosh goodt. But if Espigador cooms mit him, dere vill pe no change. He vill kill midoutd waiting."

"You seem to understand the natures of the gentle Mexicans. When you drop words of wisdom like those, it is as well to listen to them, and to provide accordingly. Perhaps it might be as well to take the ranch now, and provide beforehand for either contingency. There is one man here I don't care to harm if I can get around it. Outside of that I would just as soon as not make a general clean-up. I think I will try it on. You can keep out of the mess until the frolic is over. It can't make matters any worse for you, and may make them a heap better. Here goes."

He gave a signal to Frank to follow him, and strolled away, as unconcerned as he had come.

CHAPTER XXXV.

"LADS OF SENSE."

WHEELER WILSON had not entered the cabin at all, but during the greater part of the conversation had stood leaning lazily against the door-post, while Frank, of the Antelope, stood almost beside him. From their appearance no one could have judged that all three were talking of matters of life and death; yet the guard, who, unfortunately for him, was just out of hearing distance, suspected that there was something behind the carelessness, and that it was time to interfere. It was a step forward that he had made, which was the signal to the sport that it was time to close the conference.

As the two strolled away, Wilson leisurely pulling at his pipe, the sentinel said something to them in Spanish. He had his carbine at a ready, and did not seem to be in a pleasant humor at all.

The sport understood him well enough, but paid no attention. The words might as well have fallen upon ears that were deaf. He kept on, his attention given entirely to the girl at his side.

Yet he was not as careless as he looked. If the finger of the bandit had rested on the trigger in earnest he would have known it on the instant. His steps were turned toward the outlet to the *cul de sac*; and his manner left it an open question whether chance or intent led them in that direction.

Again the sentinel spoke; and this time with an emphasis that showed he was in deadly earnest. He threatened to fire if another step was taken in that direction.

That brought the crisis for which the sport was aiming. One of the other men started up, and stepped in front of him, holding out both hands, with a gesture that was to show the way was barred.

The fellow had a belt around his waist which held a brace of revolvers, and near by his carbine leaned against the rock. Before he knew what had struck him Wheeler Wilson had them all, and he was lying senseless, with a broken head.

Frank, of the Antelope, had a warning of what was coming, and might have kept out of the line of danger if she had chosen, but when the sport made his spring she went with him, and had one of the revolvers in her hand, even before he possessed himself of the other. Then, while he caught up the carbine, and sent a snap-shot at the sentinel, who first was bothered by his comrade and then lingered on his aim, the girl threw herself behind a convenient boulder, and cocked the pistol. A war was at hand, and she was ready for it.

With two men down the odds were still two to one, numerically; but once armed and Wheeler Wilson was worth about half a dozen of these men, who would much sooner slip a knife in his back than meet him face to face in a struggle for life. Their cowardly instincts brought to the front by the surprise, every man of them darted for cover, thinking they could thus command the camp while themselves in safety. By the time they began to peer out cautiously, with the design of bringing down the sport from long range, he too had disappeared.

Wilson had not gone far, however. The way to the mouth of the glen was open, and he knew that if he did not take advantage of the confusion while it lasted, chance and numbers together might make things bad for him. He shouted to Frank to follow him, and darted into the opening, followed by the girl, who seemed as active and as dangerous as he was.

"Wish we could have brought Moses with us, but it don't do to try to do too much at once. We will get hold of him later on."

"And meantime, what do you intend to do with these fellows? Will you try to kill them all; or, do you think we can make them knuckle down by talking business? It looks like a heavy contract for two of us to carry."

"As I said before, I don't mind taking these murdering cut-throats of Mexicans as I can get at them; but there is one fellow there I would as soon let slip if I could do it without getting myself in danger. He is disgusted with his partners because they left him in the lurch when they ran away from Arden, and if I had the chance I might bring him over to our side. He has taken to the brush like the rest of them, but I will wager he is no coward. I am gambling on the chances of his coming over to our side in one way or another; if he don't we will be apt to hear from him in a way that will be more solid than social. I wish you were well out of the mess. The odds of half a dozen is nothing to me; but something may come to you, and I would hate to bring you into harm."

"Don't worry for me. Only say when you think it is time to begin shooting, and I will take care of the rest. I got here before you did, so that there is nothing for you to blame yourself about. Steady, now; I think there is a movement coming."

The movement, such as it was, had begun; but in a very cautious way. With one accord the Mexicans had begun to edge toward the opening through which the two had disappeared. From cover to cover they were flitting; and so carefully were they advancing that they did not seem to think they were visible long enough to allow time for an aim.

Half a dozen appearances and reappearances were made without bringing a shot; but it was not because Wilson did not have time enough to send in a bullet or so with his usual fatal exactness. He cautioned Frank to watch for a rush, but to hold her fire until they could both do the execution they wanted. Meantime, he was watching something that was going on further back. The American lieutenant had his position, either by chance or choice, the rearmost of all. Now, he was doing something—was it a flag of truce that he was covertly displaying?

The sport was inclined to believe that it was; and watched for an opportunity to answer it. If he could get the man on his side it would leave the result no longer in doubt. Of course he was keeping himself as nearly concealed as possible while watching; but he managed to have a pretty fair view of everything in the camp, for all of that; and he saw after the flag had been advanced for some little time, the man himself stand boldly up, with his hand upraised in token of amity.

"All right, sport," he shouted.

"Keep out of the line and I'll see you later. Play me fair and I'll make sure that you don't suffer."

"Go for them then, pard. We have them all surrounded."

And out from his place of concealment stepped the American outlaw, with a pistol in each hand.

Was the fellow in earnest? Arden had been inclined to think that he was vamping when he threatened to be revenged on the Mexicans for their desertion, but Wheeler believed differently. He had only a moment to make up his mind whether it was a trick or not, since he could see that the others were all ready to open the ball, and if he was going to accept the proffered aid it must be at once.

"Ho, there, you fools! Hands up!"

And with this challenge Wilson stepped boldly out into the open just as the Mexicans raised up for a dash. The sport spoke in Spanish, so that

there was no mistake about their understanding him, and the unexpected movement was disconcerting in the extreme.

"I don't want to shoot unless I have to, but don't you see that if the ball once opens you are all elected for wooden overcoats? We three are good for a dozen like you."

"Make it four, pard," added the cheerful voice of Edgar Arden, and the second of the All-around Sports stepped out from behind Wilson.

His appearance was a surprise, but to Wheeler it was an agreeable one. In his mind it left the result no longer in doubt, and he was sure that the outlaws would surrender without another shot being fired.

The result justified this conviction. Arden's lesson had not been thrown away on them, and pretty well satisfied that the only result would be the escape of the prisoners, in whom they had no such overpowering interest that they would risk their lives to hold them, they threw up their hands like cowards that they were, and this hand in the game was scored in favor of the All-around Sports.

"Lads of sense, all," laughed Wilson. "We don't want to crowd you, but at the same time we are not running any risks. I don't propose to plunder the camp, and if you can straighten things up with the captain when he comes you won't be any the worse for having come down at the call. Just drop your arms and move over to that side of the camp, and we will hold a council, whether to evacuate or wait till to-morrow. I would like to see Tomasso, but perhaps there will be too much danger for the possible profit. We shall see what Moses says. Saphirenstein, come forth!"

Moses had discreetly kept himself out of what he thought might be the range of flying bullets, but had overheard what was said and was satisfied that the immediate danger was over, and that the nearer he could now get to the sports the better. He hurried out of the cabin.

For once Saphirenstein had feelings too deep for utterance, and he silently shook the hands of both sports.

"Not even ordinary amusement," murmured Frank, of the Antelope. "One man knocked silly and another creaked. He is crawling to his feet now and looks bewildered over the aspect of affairs. Keep an eye on the fellow, Wilson; he may strike from behind."

The man offered no resistance, however, but crawled off to his comrades the moment he saw how things had gone.

"My daughter?" said Moses, at length, looking up at Arden.

"Safe and sound, I hope," answered the sport. "I had to take chances of some kind. I didn't think she was in much danger, anyhow, as she was surrounded with friends, with whom she will stay till she hears something further from you. Of course, the ranch was not habitable, and the whole outfit has gone to Espigador's. You had Silvio's word that he would protect her, and he gave me the same assurance, or I would not have left her."

"But how does it come that you are here?" hastily interposed Wilson.

"Simplest thing in the world. I followed the trail, and it was one that a blind man ought to be able to trace. I had not expected to venture in before night; but it was easy, oh, so easy, that I thought I would go anyhow. I knew if Wilson was still safe that he and I could do the job; and that would be better than the mixed-up mess that Silvio calculated on making to-night. I tell you, there is lots of fun in these free-and-easy excursions; but then, again, there's lots of danger. Get to shooting once, and no one can tell who is coming out with broken bones."

"But, good! Heavens! my daughter! She vosh in more tanger as ever. Id will be murder sure, mit her. Why did you not leave me pe, an' dake some bedder care for her?"

"Don't get excited. It will be all right. You vote to leave, then?"

"Yes; go at once!" interposed Frank, as the Jew did not answer Wilson's question. There is nothing further for you to do here, and delays are dangerous. I have been losing time, and must be about my work; but I do not care to leave you in danger, since we have once faced it together."

"I might do differently if I was the head of the outfit; but Moses has the say-so, and he speaks for an advance. If he will promise not to lose his nerve again we will strike out to find his daughter and Silvio. He ought to know by this time that he is safer from this man, that he is so much afraid of, when he is with us than when he is wandering around in the mountains. Get up your nerve again, man, and we will have this bank straightened out for good and all."

"Gourage vosh a goodt ding, but brudence vosh a petter. If we had not comed here dere vouldt have been a mishdake all aroundt. When ve meet Espigador keep an eye on him, undt I vill not be afraidt ad all."

"It may be as well to watch out for breakers as we go along," suggested Arden as they turned away to seek the outer, and perhaps safer world.

"There is no telling how soon Tomasso will be along with his friends, and I left a couple

men trussed up at points along the route. They may be loose and roaring. Even a fool sometimes shoots plumb center, when he holds from a rest behind a stone wall."

"To say nothing of the chances of meeting Captain Flash and his friends. They are somewhere in the neighborhood, and if they be not near that same ranch I am very much off. I think I shall go along to see; but I doubt if I wish you to assist at the interview if we find them. I might fight them myself, and yet fight for them."

It was Wilson who answered Frank's suggestion.

"Better stay with us till the end. You have not forgotten what Saphirenstein was saying a bit ago?"

"About the fortune? No. But it is too late for that. No doubt there are other claimants, or other heirs, to whom it would do more good. I am tired of life and living. I might have cared for it a year ago; now, let it go where it will do the most good. It would be thrown away on such as me."

She spoke moodily; and as they went along, side by side, Wheeler Wilson almost regretted his question, since it seemed to have deepened the cloud that had lately been resting on the face of Frank, of the Antelope.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

NO TIME LIKE THE PRESENT.

ESPIGADOR thought that he was keeping his eyes well about him as he made the retreat from his own home. Perhaps he did, but there were other eyes that were sharper, for they saw him without being seen—and recognized him.

"It is Espigador," whispered Tomasso to Captain Flash, who was by his side.

"He waits not for Tomasso to do his dirty work; but takes hold of it himself. A thousand ounces it is the daughter of the Jew."

"It may be worth a thousand ounces to us if the Don is out of his castle. The work will not be half so hard if he is not at the front. And it will be worth while to see where he is going, and then gather them both in. There is a chance there for ransom if we fail in everything else. Lucky your men came along. It gives us the force to spare. He ought to be looked after. There is no doubt more money in knowing what is his little game."

"Vengeance, is his little game," promptly responded Tomasso. "If it seems worth the while I will follow. After the way he hath trifled with me it would be life to my soul to let him know that there be better men than he."

"Thanks, Tomasso; but all the same, I would just as soon you stayed with us. The Don might make it worth your while; and the men who won't sell out their friends if they can get their price, is scarce in your profession. There is not much mutual trust and admiration in this outfit. Pick out a good man to follow the trail, and keep track of the lay of the land, and Tite can take two or three more and follow him to his lair, which cannot be far from here. If he has any force, watch him. If the thing can be done—and I guess it can—take him alive. And don't forget his prisoner. Perhaps he will buy her back, after he has provided for himself."

It was not altogether a pleasant mission; but Thompson felt that there was little choice in the matter of danger. It was as likely that there would be hard fighting at the ranch. He suggested, however, that perhaps Burden would be glad to undertake the commission.

"Thanks; but Burden would be too willing. And if he once got his hands on the damsel he would forget all about his pards, and play for all the stakes in sight. You will do the job up in fine style; and say nothing to him about the matter. It was lucky that he is a little too far to the rear to catch on to what is being said. I would hate to refuse him anything; but the fact is, I prefer to have him along with us. He is inclined to run things in his own interests, anyhow, and if he saw a chance for a speculation, and the Jewess, together—good-by, John!"

Captain Flash spoke in a free-and-easy-sort-of-way; but somehow, since the two pards had left Glory Flat, they found that he was of the sort who had his own way, and did not allow of much trifling. The arrangements were made without further delay; and Tite Thompson, as he dropped into the wake of Espigador, saw the band filing off on their way toward the ranch.

To follow the Don and his prisoner was both a delicate and difficult piece of business, if it was to be done after the fashion indicated by Flash. It would have been easy enough to overtake and capture him; but to allow him to reach his destination first was something else. If they came too near they would be seen; and if they once got too far behind they would lose him altogether.

Thompson mentally resolved that he was not going to follow very far before closing in. He did not care to be separated from his friends, and thought that Espigador would probably be worth as much at one time as at another. If Burden undertook any nonsense about Rebecca he might pay her ransom himself, and outside of that there was no reason that he could see why he should not carry the prisoners directly to the ranch, as soon as they were taken. By that

time the building would be under their control, and it would be more convenient to arrange matters for the future from that as headquarters.

The Don kept on his way after a deliberate fashion, and evidently unsuspecting of the fact that he was being pursued, in spite of the fact that he had got away from his house unseen. Now and then he looked around, but it was always to the front.

"He is expecting some one to join him," thought Thompson. "If they want to reach him they had better come quickly. I will give orders to close up, and watch that he doesn't drop the girl and save himself. Ah!"

The journey was not to be so long as Thompson had feared. Certainly they had not gone more than a few miles, and here, the Don was halting.

"We have him now," the sport whispered to his guide, who was just at his side. We must be careful that the girl comes to no harm in the racket. If I know anything about the man he will die hard, unless we can down him before he knows what has struck him. Close up, now, and be careful. He may have a force there waiting for him. Better to leave the horses here. He will hear them if we try to come nearer with them."

"Si, señor," responded the outlaw, in a whisper; and setting the example by sliding off of his horse.

Without further order the rest followed suit, and then the whole party, save one man, who was left in charge of the mustangs, crept on. As far as they could see, Espigador had met no one, but had dismounted in front of what appeared to be a small cabin. He still held the girl in his arms, and was hesitating as though he was expecting some one and was wondering why he had been disappointed.

While he waited there began to come to his ears, as well as to those of the lurkers, the sound of distant, galloping horses. He listened a moment, and then, as if satisfied, turned, and entered the cabin.

Tite Thompson made up his mind quickly. It was best to have Espigador's case settled before his friends arrived.

There did not seem to be any one else, either in the cabin, or in its vicinity; so that the moment the Don turned his back to the outside world there was a silent rush. By the time that a glimmering light crept out from within, Thompson and his retainers were just without, listening to what was being said on the other side of the wall.

"Sit there and be silent for a few moments," said the Don, sharply.

"The stay here will not be for long. I hear my men coming now, though they should have been before us. In their hands you will receive such treatment as your actions warrant, until your fate has been decided on. That will not be until I have settled with the man you know as your father."

"And meantime I am to remain a prisoner—here?" asked the girl, quietly looking around.

"Scarcely, my child. There is a place in the mountains that will suit better to cage my pretty bird. Here she might be found by meddling strangers; but up there, in the recesses that are known to but few, no such thing can happen."

"And my father—what is it that is to happen to him? Is it not enough that he has already been stripped of whatever he brought here? And are you so sure of the dens and holes of safety in the mountains, that you think you and your outlaws cannot be hunted down? You may make it unpleasant for us; but sooner or later it will be death to you. Come, sir; there is no profit in holding me, since no ransom can my father pay unless I am free, to negotiate for it. You are keeping money out of your own pocket in doing this."

"And you think I am an outlaw, that would run these risks, and labor thus, for paltry gold. Poor fool! Not for twice the value of the lost diamonds would I let you go; or spare him who calls himself thy father, a single pang that I could bring to his heart by his torture, or thine. I am Espigador, and have waited for years for my vengeance—the time for it is nearly here, now."

"And so is Mr. Titus Thompson," remarked a pleasant-faced young man, in a bantering tone, stepping through the door, which swung open to his touch. "Not a movement, sir, or down you go. I have you covered."

Possibly Espigador was never before quite so surprised. This man was a perfect stranger to him, and he might have tried to gain time by pretending not to understand the summons, but he knew that his conversation with Rebecca had been overheard; and after that it would be useless to feign ignorance. And when a man speaks with a cocked revolver in each hand there are only two courses open; either to wilt at once, or to begin to fight just as promptly. Espigador chose to do the former; but he did it after his own fashion. Very promptly he threw himself backward upon the floor.

Espigador could not know, but possibly he suspected that it was more of an object to take him alive than have him dead. If Thompson had pulled trigger he might have stopped the

Don; but he waited to see what the movement meant—and found out, when the Don disappeared through a trap-door that opened in the floor and then closed again. He had captured Rebecca; but the principal prize was missing.

He called to the men, who came rushing in after him, to look after Rebecca, and to see that no one else escaped, while he sprang forward to find the opening through which the Don had passed.

It was easier to locate the spot where the opening had been than to move the trap. The cabin was a mean little affair as viewed from the outside, but it had a solid floor of rock, and with the best of tools it would take some time to successfully attack that pave. With bare hands, or with such poor implements as were available, it was little use to try. There was something else to think about, just now. The sounds of hurrying feet came nearer; and it was an even question whether they had not better take to their heels. If Thompson and his party remained there they were no doubt in for a fight, which was something to be avoided, if possible.

"Too late," Tite decided, as he stepped to the door. "If we run now they must see us, and be on us before we can get to the horses. I hate the slaughter, but it is our only chance. They will not be looking for anything of the kind, and we can give them a volley as they come up, that would empty half of their saddles, if my fellows can shoot. The odds ought to be on our side then. If they are not we can stand a siege till we have cut them down to even numbers. Ready, boys! Hold your fire till you are sure of your aim. I will give the order to fire and see that you put your lead where it will do the most good. If there are a dozen of them we ought to empty half the saddles at the first fire."

Some of his gang understood him; and some took the cue from the actions of the others. If the party they heard was coming to the cabin it would not be possible to avoid a fight; and for that there was no time like the present.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

HOW FRANK KEPT HER WORD.

It happened that Espigador and the outlaws were altogether wrong as to who it was that was coming, and left to their own devices the party would not have passed within a hundred yards of the cabin.

But the Don made a most serious mistake. There was an outlet to the passage under the cabin, which reached the upper world at some little distance. From this Espigador suddenly emerged, and darted toward the horsemen who were sweeping past at a steady gallop.

"Halt, there!" he shouted. "Make ready for fight! The outlaws are here and in wait for you. They lost me by a miracle, and have a prisoner there we must take out of their hands. This way, quick!"

"Here we are, sport, and in the line of prisoners perhaps the best plan would be to take you in first till we see who you are and what is going on around here. It seems to me that you look suspicious, and that I can hear the voice of a woman over yonder, that is not altogether unfamiliar. Steady, now; don't you move until you get the word or down you go."

The voice belonged to one of the All-around Sports, and it made little difference to Espigador that he could not recognize which it was—though it was Wilson who did the speaking.

"Waste not time with me," answered the Don, without semblance of surprise or fear. "Look after the bandits in yonder cabin first. After that I am at thy pleasure. There will be a desperate fight, and best would it be to have my hands with thee."

"Dot vos all richt. Maybe id vill nod be as mooch ov a fight if we keep you out of the way. It would be petter do shoot now undt not wait, undt if you move I vill trill you, anyhow. Dot vosh der truth, so, now."

The Don had supposed that it was a certain party of his own men for whom he had been looking, or he never would have left the shelter of the underground tunnel; until Saphireinstein spoke he had not dreamed of his presence. At the sound of his voice, and the confident way in which Moses uttered his warning, he realized that the game was very much against him, no matter how it went with the rest. Whichever side won would not be likely to give much quarter to him, unless it was in the way of business. For gold he might still make his peace with Tomasso and his friends, and he saw now that he had better have remained with them.

And here was Saphireinstein, free, and with friends to back him. What chance was there now to get hold of him, or to carry out the scheme of revenge he had been so long brooding over? The chances were that the Jew would shoot in another moment—would it not be well to try to forestall him, while the rest were turning their attention toward the cabin, from which had come the warning cry raised by Rebecca? The girl was inclined to think that the man at her side was more dangerous than a world of strangers. She had already recognized him as the friend of Nelson Burden.

Saphireinstein had the advantage, since he held the drop. His revolver was cocked and aimed; it required but the pressure of his finger to make his threat good. But he had not the experience of the other, and might wait for the Don to draw with a flourish and a shout. It would be a sudden death—not at all the lingering torture that Espigador had vowed he should suffer—but it would not be total failure. And then he could fall back on the cabin, and cast his fortunes with the men who would defend it to the last. He was sure that, having shown his good intentions, he would be welcomed as an ally while the struggle lasted.

All this went through the mind of the Don like a flash. When Moses ceased speaking he was ready with his answer. His hand had glided softly to his weapon, and under the steady pressure of his finger the hammer was rising—and still the finger tightened.

Then, at the flash and report he threw himself backward, in one long leap that brought him around, facing the other way; and plunging forward a few paces he disappeared as suddenly as he had appeared.

If he had only known it, two men there held his life at their finger ends; and if they did not take it they were wiser than he knew. He could be found at another time if it was worth the while to slay him; but just now he might be made worth more as a pilot, whether willing, or not. Moses went down to the shot, but they did not stop to see what harm had been done. Time was too precious. Right after the fugitive they darted; and yet Frank, of the Antelope, had flung herself the quickest from her horse, and was a pace or so in advance and darted into the secret passage at the very heels of Espigador.

Something like a panic had seized the Mexican, as he heard the rapid footsteps in his rear. He did not attempt to turn, and close the opening, nor did he, but fled along with increasing speed, bent upon making his way back to the hut. From above, the stairway could be defended against a dozen. But twice, as he hastened along, he threw up his hand and fired back over his shoulder. He knew not who followed, but the chance shot that hit could not go far wrong. He knew by the noise that more than one followed in his wake.

The stairway of stone was reached at last, and up that he bounded. Dark though the vault might be he knew it thoroughly, and had no need to hesitate when once he saw the faintest pencil of light above. A touch on the spring; the stone swung from its place, and he leaped upward into the cabin, and turned to touch again the spring that was to close the trap. Another second and he would have been safe, though Tite Thompson stood at his back, covering him with his revolver.

And just in that second a shot flamed up from the foot of the stairway.

Only one shot; but it did double duty. It tore through the temple of the stooping man, and then buried itself in the heart of the man behind him. Alive, though mortally wounded, Espigador settled to the floor; but Tite Thompson never spoke again, and his eyes were already glazing when Frank of the Antelope staggered up through the trap. One hand still held the smoking weapon, while the other was pressed to her breast, and between the trembling fingers the red blood was slowly oozing. The chance shots of Espigador had done the work for her only too well.

Only a step or two behind Frank came the All-around Sports. As yet they knew not what had happened, but were sure that their best chance was to keep close behind the Don. If Rebecca was there it would be the danger of death to her for the Don to meet her now. They burst into the room, springing over the prostrate forms in their way, just in time to see the Mexican bandits rushing madly out of the opened door. They could not be hired to face the two sports when their leader was down. The room was cleared in a twinkling, and Wheeler Wilson held Rebecca in his arms, while Arden looked at the dead and wounded.

Frank stood at the side of the trap. Her face was a ghastly white, and her eyes were full of horror, as she stared down at the face of the man she had last loved. It had been easy to threaten, but this reality chilled her blood, even faster than the deadly lead of Espigador.

"Dead! And by my hand! Why could not I have dropped on the stair? Then, perhaps, I had never known. And I did love him so! I am so glad I have such little time left to sorrow, or I might slay myself, after all. No, do not touch me. I am bleeding internally as well, and can only last a few moments more. I have no time to waste. What little time there is left I want to be with him."

She sunk down by the side of the dead gambler and drew his head on her lap, bending over him like a mother over her sleeping infant. Then she bent lower and lower, gasping a few husky words.

"I lied to the Jew. If there is any wealth due to me give it to my sister. Her name is Helen Hatton. I heard from her last in San Francisco. She can prove. Find her. Now, leave me alone with my dead!"

Her cheek rested upon that of the dead man;

and she moved, she breathed, she spoke—no more.

The outlaws, in their flight, had left the door open. A wavering, uncertain step sounded without, and Saphireinstein stood in the doorway. The bullet that brought him down had struck him hard, but he was better than very many dead men yet.

"Dere vosh a noise ov bistols in der distance, undt dere must be vighting at der ranch. Berhaps der var vill dis vay coomdt. Mine daughter, hafe you heardt anydings of her diamondsh?"

"You unsanctified old Shylock! Let the diamonds go for the present," exclaimed Arden. "Silvio was to raise an expedition; the chances are that his force and Tomasso have locked horns. Win or lose, the outlaws will be apt to visit this spot, to pick up the force they left here. We can't get there in time to do Silvio any good, for one way or another it is about over by this time. We may as well bar the door, and fight it out on this line till we see if Silvio will not come this way himself. We can't both leave these corpses, and if I am not much mistaken, you are in no condition to ride. You will not want to run away from the Don, now that he is dead, though I own you were hardly to blame for wanting to keep out of his way while he was living. What was the secret of his hate?"

"Vot he galls lofe for der modder ov Rebecca. Dot vosh der shstory in achmall type. At annodder time I can oxblain better. I diuks dey are goming now."

Tomasso was not very anxious to sack the ranch, unless it could be done without getting hard raps. It was possible to steal a herd of cattle or horses, and pick up other articles of profit without going near to the buildings, and he did not believe that the diamonds would be found there, even if Espigador had captured them. When Silvio, with a force equal to his own came upon him, Tomasso was ready for an instant retreat. The prisoners, if Tita Thompson had executed his mission successfully, were worth more than the ranch.

When Tomasso ran away, Silvio ran after. The pursuit was a pretty even thing, and Tomasso had little time to spare when he came thundering up to the cabin, calling for Thompson and the rest to come out quickly; and he hesitated not a moment when he heard the solid answer that Wheeler Wilson gave him. The outlaws swept away, taking Burden and his handful of men along with them.

Silvio and his men were close at their heels, and would probably have been closer, had it not been for a cry from the sport, which brought him and his men toward the cabin.

What he found there led Silvio to abandon the pursuit at once. Watchers were detailed to remain with the dead, while the sports were to accompany the wounded Jew and his daughter to the ranch.

"Danks for der invitashun. Ve con oxcept it now. But hafe any von heardt anydings of der diamonds?"

Moses had Silvio by the hand, and poured the question into his ear in a heartbroken manner. They were both more than surprised to hear an answer from another source.

"You just bet, old man! I found 'em myself. They weren't a safe thing for you to be toting around, so I took charge of them until we could see how the cat was going to hop. I'll give 'em to yer in ther mornin'."

The speaker was Master Harry, who had been one of Silvio's attendants.

His words opened the eyes of Wheeler Wilson, who was pretty sure now of what he had laughed at himself for suspecting. The boy had stolen the gems out of his pocket, returning the case, however!

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

FINALLY.

As the party made their way toward the ranch, they came across a man who lay on the ground, groaning. It was without doubt one of the outlaws; but of course he could not be left there. On examination it proved to be Captain Flash. Probably he had dropped from the saddle without the knowledge of his companions. In the *melee* with Silvio there was some rapid shooting and a disorderly retreat. It was found that he could be moved, so the wound of the captain was hastily bandaged, and he was carried along.

At the time it looked as though he would prove to be a white elephant, but it turned out that he was of some use, after all. When morning came a messenger with a flag of truce came with it. He bore a communication from Tomasso, whose occupation was so patent that he made no bones about glorying in it; but Wheeler Wilson thought he saw the hand of Burden between the lines.

It stated that they had captured a prisoner, who might, or might not, be of some importance in the world, as, from documents found upon him, it was certain that he was a detective, belonging in the United States, who had been masquerading under the garb of a bum, and passing under the name of Billy Button. It was

proposed to exchange this man for a wounded prisoner, understood to be in the hands of the people at the ranch. If the aforesaid exchange was not made promptly, they intended to hang Mr. Button without delay.

"Trade, of course," advised the sports. "None of us are thief-catchers; and I don't see that we have any use for Captain Flash. As usual, the fellow has been getting into trouble. He was a man with a theory, and it happened that the theory was all wrong, and wouldn't work."

When the exchange had been made Button had a heartrending story to tell about the treachery of Espigador, who had left him trussed up, to fall for the third time into Tomasso's hands. He was also thoroughly convinced that he had made a mistake in regard to the two sports, and went back to the States a sadder, and it is to be hoped, a wiser man.

Although Espigador had obtained the assistance of Silvio in enticing Saphireinstein to this region, he was innocent of the conspiracy to take his life. He was made to believe that the Jew held the family diamonds of the Espigadors, stolen by him, or his agents, and that in this way only could they be recovered.

After the funeral there came exclamations—and a good many were to be made. The dying words of Frank, of the Antelope, were not forgotten, and the Espigador family history was raked up more fully than it is necessary here to set forth. Frank and Helen Hatton were twin daughters of Espigador's cousin, and to them the fortune of the family should have gone. Who killed their father it did not seem best to inquire too closely, or how they were stolen away in their infancy and separated. Mrs. Hatton was Helen's mother by adoption, only. Frank had found her sister by chance, and after that kept track of her, though keeping her own existence to herself. It seemed that there was no trouble about Helen proving who she was, but until very lately she had not an idea of what she might be entitled to. She had learned to love Raquel, and did not care now to make any struggle to obtain what was hers by right; and for the same reason did not wish to have the past life of Espigador entirely laid bare, though she learned much of the truth, from the story of Saphireinstein, as well as from other sources.

Espigador had been a wanderer in his time, even as Saphireinstein had been. The two had met in Spain, when Moses was a younger and a handsomer man. It was there that the Don had been captivated by the young girl who was afterward the mother of Rebecca. Unfortunately she did not altogether discourage him at the start, and it was not for some time that he learned she was already the betrothed of Saphireinstein.

At that he swore revenge, and made several attempts to take the life of the man and woman he considered had wronged him. Wherever Saphireinstein went the Don came after, until, at length, he partially succeeded in his object. Perhaps it could not have been proved, but Saphireinstein was sure that he had slain his wife, and had almost murdered him. After that the Don, who probably believed that he had accomplished his end, disappeared, and was heard of no more, for years; and the Jew began to hope that he was dead. Instead of that he was in possession of the Espigador estates; and would probably have remained so had he not found that the Jew had come to this country, and was repairing the fortunes that for years had been in a shattered condition.

Concerning the marriage of the Don, there was no mystery. He won wealth by it, and a daughter whom he cared for more than for anything else, though not even his love for her could cause him to forego his desire for vengeance.

All of this Silvio learned—but it made no difference. He had cared for the lovely Jewess as for a woman in distress, but his heart belonged to Raquel alone. He told her so, when she would have offered him his freedom. After that she loved him more than ever.

Saphireinstein had changed his mind somewhat, and was inclined to think there might be worse in the world than Wheeler Wilson; and Rebecca was sure of it. Before they left the ranch—and after he had found that the sport had quite a snug little fortune laid by—Moses and his daughter became almost of one mind in the matter.

What Arden's fate was to be at last accounts was not quite so certain. As the prophecy of Brigada had partially come true, the young lady began to feel that fate was against her, and did not seem to object so strongly as long as it came in no more questionable shape than the shape of Edgar Arden. She had insisted on dividing the estate with Raquel—who would have given up everything. Now, she seemed willing to share the moiety with the All-around Sport who had won her gratitude, and perhaps her love.

Master Harry was not forgotten. He owned up to having been one of the worst sort of boys in the city, but now he was anxious to turn over a new leaf, and every one was willing to assist him. He remained with Raquel, but he was, also, the warmest of friends to Helen; and it seemed uncertain which of the two was to adopt him. Saphireinstein, for once, was possessed of

a generous spirit, and desired to reward him liberally, but the youth refused to be so rewarded.

Judge Burden—who was at the bottom of the abduction of Rebecca, at Glory Flat—did not return to that thriving little burg, but cast in his lot with that of Tomasso and his gang, and Captain Flash. They continued to work for big game, on information sent them by their friends and correspondents, with varying success, but they gave to the All-around Sports a wide berth, and went no more on the trail of the diamonds. They also failed to find a certain American who at one time was a valued member of Tomasso's band. If they had done so within a reasonable time his pockets would have been well worth the turning, since Moses for once had been generous, and loaded them down as a reminder that he recognized the favor done when Wheeler Wilson was engineering the escape from the hands of the bandit. It is doubtful if the chief will ever be able to get even with either him or the sport—but it would not be good for them to fall into his hands.

Just how much Tiburcio Creanza had to do with the plans of his friends was never known; but after that night's work he was seen no more at the hacienda, where Raquel and her friend rule jointly.

Rebecca and her father remained there until the latter had fully recovered of his wounds.

After his losses at the destruction of his ranch, and the cattle raid that was attributed to Tomasso, Silvio did not care to buy the diamonds—especially as the wedding was deferred for a year; but Saphireinstein felt no ill will for him when he departed, and has a gem ready set to forward as recognition of the good treatment he had received from the daughter of the foe who had almost hounded him to his death. Arden and Wheeler Wilson escorted him back to civilization, and the revenue officers gave them no trouble. Arden has an invitation to return to the ranch as a welcome visitor; and Helen expects that he will come before long; while Wilson has toned down much since he has begun to lead a city life and visit at the Saphireinsteins'. What will come of it may not be hard to guess.

THE END.

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